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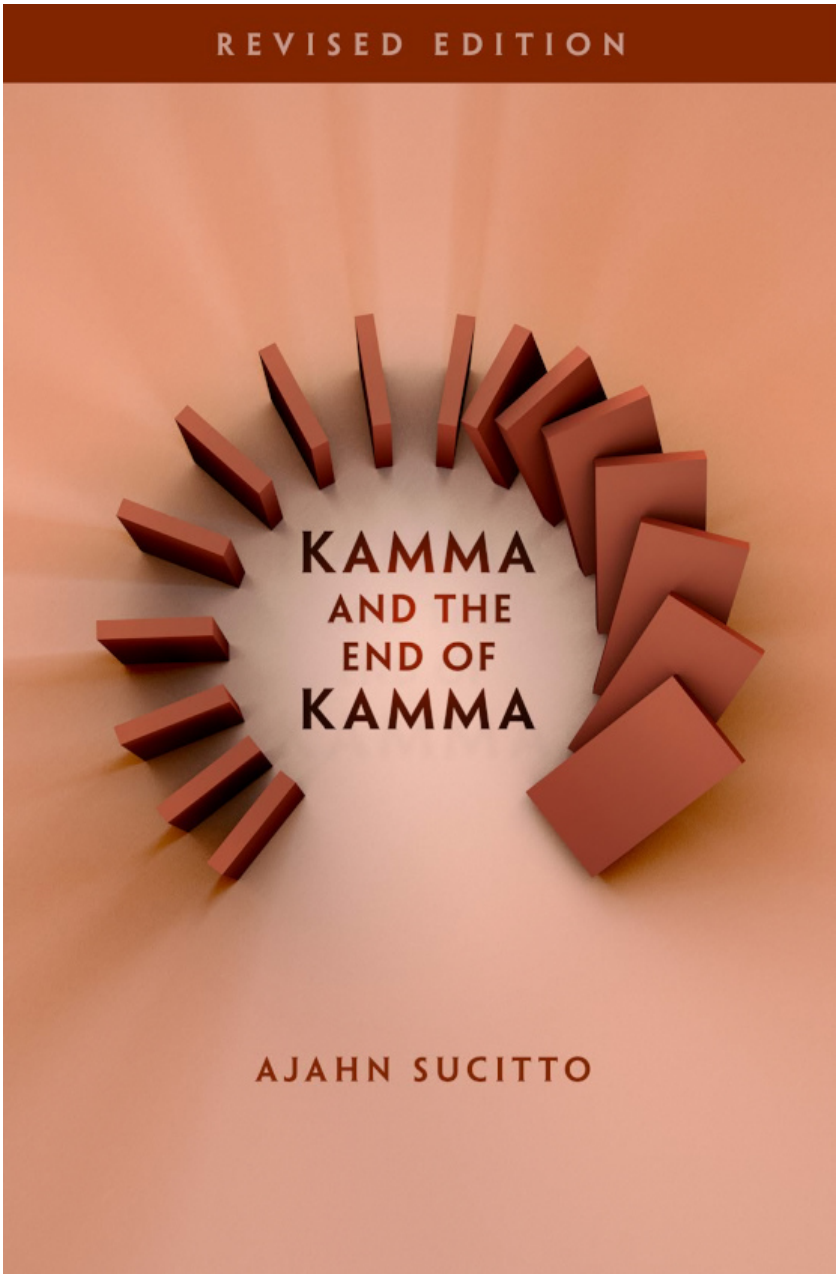

Kamma
and the
end of
Kamma

Ajahn Sucitto

‘Kamma should be known. The cause of kamma should be known. The diversity in kamma should be known. The result of kamma should be known. The cessation of kamma should be known. The path of practice for the cessation of kamma should be known.’ Thus it has been said. In reference to what was it said?

‘Intention, I tell you, is kamma. Intending, one does kamma by way of body, speech, and intellect.’

‘And what is the cause of kamma? Contact is the cause of kamma.’

‘And what is the diversity in kamma? There is kamma to be experienced in hell, kamma to be experienced in the realm of common animals, kamma to be experienced in the realm of the hungry shades, kamma to be experienced in the human world, kamma to be experienced in the world of the devas. This is called the diversity in kamma.’

‘And what is the result of kamma? The result of kamma is of three sorts, I tell you: that which arises right here & now, that which arises later [in this lifetime], and that which arises following that. This is called the result of kamma.’

‘And what is the cessation of kamma? From the cessation of contact is the cessation of kamma; and just this noble eightfold path – right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration – is the path of practice leading to the cessation of kamma.’

A.6:63 (Thanissaro, trans.)

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Preface

This book evolved out of some talks I had given in the space of a few years, mostly at Cittaviveka Monastery. In these talks, I had been exploring the relevance of the Buddha's teachings on kamma to the practice of meditation. At first glance, the two topics may not seem that closely related: kamma is a teaching on behaviour, and meditation is apparently about doing nothing, isn't it? Or we might have the idea that 'Kamma is all about who I was in a previous life, what I'm stuck with now, and what I'll get reborn as. Kamma is about being somebody, whilst meditation is about not being anybody.' Not so. I hope that the ensuing texts, which have evolved from talks into essays, help make it clear that the principles of kamma link 'external' behaviour to the 'internal' practice of meditation. And that meditation is one kind of kamma – the kamma that leads to the end of kamma. In fact, 'kamma and the end of kamma' is a useful summary of what the Buddha had to offer as a path to well-being and to awakening.

The Buddha's Three Knowledges

The foundational experience of the Buddha's Dhamma is in the 'three knowledges': realizations that are said to have occurred to the Buddha in a sequence, on one night. Despite practising formless, disembodied meditation and asceticism with intense resolve, he felt that they had not borne fruit in terms of his quest for 'the Deathless'. It was eventually through shifting his approach to one of peaceful and reflective inquiry that three realizations arose; and with these his aim was achieved.

The first of these realizations was the awareness of previous lives. This knowledge transcended the most fundamental definition of our identity – as measured within the time-span of the birth and death of a body. The realization arose that what is consequently experienced as a 'person' is one manifestation in an ongoing mental process, rather than an isolated one-off self. That 'self' that he could observe forming and responding in the present was like a wave formation on a tidal ocean; it had been through many births and

deaths – and if unchecked would continue to do so.

This vision was alarming: it stretched the dilemma of birth, sickness, death and separation from the loved beyond the span of a single life to an existential purgatory of endlessly 'wandering on' (*saṃsāra*). And yet on the other hand, in seeing this, his awareness had moved to a transpersonal overview, one not limited to material existence. The door to the Deathless had begun to open.

The second realization was that the direction of the wandering-on was not haphazard, that it moved in accordance with the ethical quality of the deeds that the person carried out. This knowledge showed that there are energies that are disruptive or abusive and do not sustain clarity or health; and there are energies that are harmonious, nourishing or clearly attuned. 'Bad' and 'good' (or 'unskilful/unwholesome/dark', and 'skilful/wholesome/bright' in Buddhist terms) are consequently not just value judgements imposed by a society. They are references to energies that are psychologically, emotionally and physically palpable. Action in line with wholesome energy supports well-being and harmony, just as the contrary does the opposite. This is the principle of ethical cause and effect, or '*kamma-vipāka*'.

Kamma-vipāka means that each individual's actions don't just affect others – they leave an imprint on that individual's mind. This effect (*vipāka*) imprint or 'patterning' is retained in accordance with an inclination called 'becoming' (*bhava*). Becoming links up the 'dots' of each imprint ('kamma-formation' or *saṇkhāra*) and thereby both solidifies the pattern and gives rise to the sense of continuity. It is triggered by a reflex of clinging or attaching to phenomena, and the result is that the mind shapes an identity out of these patterns and imprints. Like one's personal genetic code, *saṇkhārā* retain our kammic blueprints, and so from day to day we remain the same person in relative terms. We become the results of our actions, for good or bad; and as these patterns contain codes for action, then based upon that inheritance, or *vipāka,* we then act – kamma.

The process of *kamma-vipāka* creates the impression of a self who is the result of their actions, and is 'coloured' by their ethical quality. To put it simply: it's not so much that I create kamma, but that kamma creates 'me'. Thus *kamma-vipāka* transcends the separation

between action and actor. It embeds consciousness in a field of ethical meaning, where every action forms and informs 'me, mine, myself'.

Also, as kamma arises in an ongoing tide of causal energy, results of action can take place in future lives. And this means that kamma binds us to the process of birth and death, something that the Buddha brought to mind in dramatic terms:

> 'Long have you (repeatedly) experienced the death of a mother … of a father … the death of a brother … the death of a sister … the death of a son … the death of a daughter … loss with regard to relatives … loss with regard to wealth … loss with regard to disease. The tears you have shed over loss with regard to disease while transmigrating and wandering this long, long time – crying and weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, being separated from what is pleasing – are greater than the water in the four great oceans.
>
> 'Why is that? From an inconstruable beginning comes transmigration. A beginning point is not evident, though beings hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving are transmigrating & wandering on. Long have you thus experienced stress, experienced pain, experienced loss, swelling the cemeteries – enough to become disenchanted with all fabricated things, enough to become dispassionate, enough to be released.'
> (S.15:3; Thanissaro, trans.)

As shocking as this admonition is, it also contains the message that liberation from this *saṃsāra* is possible: through the clearing, the letting go, and the 'ceasing' of those very energy patterns that carry cause and effect – and 'me'.

These were seen through by the third knowledge, one that brought release from the 'fabricated things', the emotions, drives, sensations and responses that constitute the raw material of grasping. This knowledge is the comprehension of the underlying outflows (*āsavā*) which condition the grasping through which *saṃsāra* operates.

Rebirth and Kamma

The agency of *saṃsāra* is not a body or an identity. Bodies endure dependent on conditions for one lifetime only. Identity – as daughter, mother, manager, invalid and so on – arises dependent on causes and conditions. What is above referred to as 'transmigration' is not 'rebirth', but the process whereby a persisting current of grasping continues to generate sentient beings. Moreover, this current isn't something that only occurs at death, but is continually fed by kamma in the here and now and woven into continuity by grasping and becoming. The result is something that, like a genetic code, can persist through lifetimes.

This process can, however, be steered and even stopped through handling its formative energies or *saṇkhārā*. These *saṇkhārā* are both the agents and pattern-builders, and the resultant codes those patterns encrypt. Hence although these formative energies are also rendered as 'formations', 'volitional formations', 'fabrications' (and more), I refer to them in their dual nature as 'patterns and programs'. 'Patterns' refer to behaviours that have already been established – for example, our breathing is sensed as a familiar pattern of sensations and energies. Our mental behaviour also has its patterns, patterns that shape our identity in kamma-distinctive ways. For instance, dependent on what we've been engaged with, we may be highly attuned to words and ideas, or not; we may have a reclusive disposition, or be more gregarious; or we may be sensitive to topics that don't affect other people. Any of these patterns are codes that construct 'me'. 'Programs' are the active aspect. They arise from these patterns – or they can be introduced by fresh action, action that we learn from others. Some of these programs are just bodily functions, such as metabolism, that are bound up with the life-force (*āyusaṇkhāra*); some are psychological. Both of these kinds of programs can go on from life to life. However, the crucial point for liberation is that we don't *have* to act in terms of our established mental behaviour. Our mind doesn't have to stay in programs that are reckless or harmful. The cycle of kamma and *vipāka* can therefore be arrested.

The good news then is that we aren't as embedded in *saṃsāra* as it might seem. In fact, not every aspect of mind is patterned and

programmed – there is the 'unborn, uncreated, unconditioned, unprogrammed'. We have some degree of choice. We can witness our patterns and programs and not engage in stressful or negative ones; we can also engage more fully with the programs that provide the clarity, goodwill and stability needed to both live a good life, and support that witnessing. The program that carries this out is the Eightfold Path that the Buddha taught. It is a guide to sustained action in both the 'external' sense of interactions with other creatures and in the social domain, and the 'internal' – that is, introspective action that cultivates, nourishes and guides the mind and heart. Practising this Path is the kamma that leads to the end of kamma.

This Path also leads to the strengthening and use of the mind's ability to steady, inquire into and let go. Through programs such as mindfulness, investigation, concentration and equanimity, it's possible to moderate and still *saṇkhārā* to the extent that grasping and becoming are switched off. This practice doesn't so much extract the person from *saṃsāra* as unplug the *saṃsāric* process for that individual awareness. What remains for that individual can then be summarized as a mind aligned to goodness, and an unbiased awareness that doesn't participate in the dynamic of further birth.

The Kamma behind this book

I admit to certain biases. There are many ways to meditate and many experienced teachers who can guide others in that respect. However, it's often the case that people need help in terms of integrating meditative attention and insight into their ordinary lives. This is partly because the insight gained in meditation retreats doesn't arise out of the context of daily life and action, but out of a specialized setting such as a meditation centre. In these situations, topics such as mindfulness of breathing receive considerable attention, but themes which are not immediately relevant to the solitude and tranquillity of sitting on a retreat don't receive the attention that they require for a harmonious life. Interpersonal relationships, when one comes out of a 'no contact, no talking' retreat scenario, seem difficult to integrate – yet they form part of everyone's life. Similarly, if we've developed meditation in terms of

peacefully accepting what is present in our awareness, how do we become decisive regarding choices around livelihood, and having sustainable plans for the future? Also, can we get guidance in the kind of personal development that encourages us to take responsibility, allows us to accept, share or question authority – and all the rest of what the society needs in terms of mature individuals?

Sadly, it can also be the case that people have valid 'spiritual' experiences on a subtle level, yet remain quite oblivious to their own biases and blind spots in terms of actions and personal interactions. What helps, in meditation and in daily life, is to learn how to sustain and moderate one's sense of purpose; how to be sensitive and authentic in oneself and in relationship to other people; and how to value and guide the energy that we apply to our lives. All this and more comes under the topic of kamma. We therefore need to get very familiar with what is skilful kamma in terms of both subtle internal and obvious external changing contexts.

Therefore I stress the centrality of understanding causality as a key to awakening because it makes practice a whole-life Way, rather than a meditation technique. It underlines the truth that *saṃsāra* is a habit, not a place. So 'getting out of *saṃsāra*' does not entail indifference to the world, the body or other people. Nor is it about getting hold of a piece of refined psycho-spiritual territory. It is the abandonment not only of the thirst for *saṃsāra*, but also of any negativity, or indifference to it. This requires the cultivation and honouring of good kamma; so overall, the process is an uplifting one. Truth, virtue and peace can come forth in the same focus.

The talks out of which this book evolved didn't form a series, but were spread out over time. So once they were transcribed, editing was necessary to standardize the language, cut out repetitions and paste in material that the listeners got from other talks around that time. Even when this was done, it seemed to me that some aspects needed a fuller explanation. Accordingly, I've worked more written material into the oral material to amplify it. I also thought to tag on some quotes and notes from the Pali Canon; and as this was getting to be rather theoretical, interleaved the essays with some

necessarily brief but relevant meditation instructions. Still, the presentation is not one of a step-by-step exposition, but of peeking in through various windows of concern and reviewing those concerns from the perspective of kamma.

This is the second edition of a text that was originally created in 2007, in which the material was collected by Ajahn Thāniya and edited by Dorothea Bowen. For this edition, I have substantially revised the text in accordance with my understanding of the topic, added more references to the Pali Canon, and made various editorial improvements. Many of these have come from, or been initiated by, attentive readers – notably the Lotus Support Group associated with Amaravati Monastery, Lisa Gorecki, Christine Mauro, Oren Jay Sofer and John Teire. Some of the changes are so radical that this is virtually a new book, in which little remains of the original spoken material.

Nicholas Halliday undertook the typesetting and new design. So there's a lot of other people's good kamma in this book – and I wish that this will continue to lead them on towards greater well-being and freedom.

Ajahn Sucitto
Cittaviveka 2020

Notes on the text

In this book, use has been made of the translations from a number of sources – with much appreciation and gratitude. However, as different translators don't always render the Pali into the same English words, for the sake of consistency, I have had to make choices, and in some cases use terms that seem closer to the meaning. Where my terminology differs from that of the translator, I enclose my word in [ ]. I have also occasionally changed the phrasing to one that in my opinion sits more comfortably in a modern reader's mind. The reader is encouraged to review and compare versions. I use Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi's translations unless otherwise stated. His translations are available through the Wisdom Publications editions of the discourses (Wisdom Publications, Boston, USA). Ven. Thanissaro's are available on the internet via the 'Access to Insight' website (accesstoinsight.org). A comprehensive collection of translated discourses using the work of Ven. Bhikkhu Sujāto and a number of other translators is available online through 'Sutta Central' (suttacentral.net). This site offers works in several languages, including the Pali original.

Endnotes

Although it can be irritating to keep flipping from the main text to the end of the book, I have added endnotes where the reader's contemplation may be enhanced by reference to the Pali discourses. You don't have to interrupt your reading of the main text to look at these. I have also added a few footnotes which may clarify points in the text as you read it.

Sutta Abbreviations

A = Numerical, or Gradual, Discourses (*Anguttara Nikāya*). This is followed by the relevant book and sutta number within that book.

D = Long Discourses (*Dīgha Nikāya*); followed by the number of the sutta and the section within that sutta.

Dhammapada. I have referred to Acharya Buddharakkhita's version (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1985) but adapted it.

Iti = *Itivuttaka*. I use the translation by John Ireland (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1997).

M = Middle-Length Discourses (*Majjhima Nikāya*); followed by the number of the sutta and the section within that sutta.

S = Connected Discourses (*Saṃyutta Nikāya*); followed by the number of the particular collection (*saṃyutta*) within the entire corpus; and the number of the sutta within that particular collection.

Udāna. I refer to John Ireland's version available through the Buddhist Publication Society, 1997, or Ven. Ānandajoti's version at ancient-buddhist-texts.net.

SNp = *Sutta-Nipāta*.

1
Action that Leads to Liberation

An Overview of the Buddha's Teachings on Kamma

If with an impure mind a person speaks or acts,
suffering follows them like the cart-wheel
that follows the ox's hoof …
If with a pure mind a person speaks or acts,
happiness follows them like
their never-departing shadow.

Dhammapada: 'The Pairs', 1 & 2

What is 'kamma', and what does it have to do with liberation? Well, as a word, 'kamma' is the Pali language version of the Sanskrit term 'karma', which has slipped into colloquial English as meaning something like a person's fate or destiny. The problem with this interpretation is that it supports a passive acceptance of circumstances: if something goes wrong, one can say: 'It was my karma' – meaning that it had to happen, perhaps because of what one had done in a previous life. That's not a very liberating notion. Where the idea really goes astray is when it is used to condone actions, as in 'it's my karma to be a thief (or to be abused).' If kamma meant this, it would rob us of responsibility and self-respect. Furthermore, there would be no way in which we could guide ourselves out of our circumstances, habits or past history: and that's a dismal prospect. However, kamma, in the way the Buddha taught it, means skilful or unskilful action – in terms of body, speech or mind – that we can exercise choice over. Making good use of this potential is what liberation, or 'awakening', is about.

Also, not everything that we experience is because of what we've done anyway.[1] If you're sick or caught up in an earthquake, it's not necessarily because you've done bad things. If that were the case, considering the number of reckless human beings there have been, the Earth would never stop quaking! Instead, kamma centres

on your current intention, inclination, or impulse (*cetanā*) – and it has a result (*vipāka*), either fortunate or unfortunate. This is the case even if why or how you acted was influenced by other people. [2] So the Buddha's encouragement was to know what you're doing and why. One simple guideline is that acting towards others in a way that you wouldn't want them to act towards you can't give good results for yourself or others. Liberation is about getting free of tendencies such as self-centredness or abusiveness.

Seen in this light, the teachings on kamma encourage a sense of responsibility for how you direct yourself in general, and for the many conscious and half-conscious choices you make throughout a day. Whether you feel at ease with yourself, or anxious and depressed; whether you're easily led astray or whether you set a good example – all this rests on your clarity and integrity.

The Four Kinds of Kamma

Kamma means 'action' in a more than physical sense: it also includes verbal action, such as whether we insult and yell at people or say truthful and reliable things – and that action includes the 'internal speech' of thinking. But just as the body does neither good nor evil – these ethical qualities being rooted in the mind that initiates the physical deed – it's the same with speech and thought. Language is neutral – it's the kindness or the malice of the mind that's creating the concepts and using the language that brings fortunate or unfortunate results. So, of the three bases of action – body, speech or mind – the kamma of our mental responses is therefore the most crucial in terms of living a wholesome life. [3]

The Buddha spoke of four kinds of kamma. There is bad or 'dark' kamma – actions such as murder, theft, falsehood and sexual abuse that lead to harmful results. Avoid this, definitely. There is good or 'bright' kamma – actions such as kindness, generosity and honesty that have beneficial effects and enhance integrity and wisdom. This kind of kamma is to be thoroughly understood, cultivated and enjoyed. It's not difficult: even refraining from dark kamma is bright in that it offers freedom from regret and supports clarity.

The third kind of kamma is a mixture of bright and dark kamma –

actions which have some good intentions in them, but are carried out unskilfully. An example of this would be having the aim to protect and care for one's family but carrying that out in a way that negatively impacts one's neighbours. And the fourth? It's the actions that lead to liberation – which I'll get to later.

As I said before, kamma has consequences – *vipāka*. Now take the case of dark kamma: if I speak harshly or abusively to someone, one effect of that is that they get hurt – and that means that they're probably going to be unpleasant towards me in the future. It's also likely that that action will have immediate effects in terms of my own mind: I get agitated. At this point, habitual psychological programs get going. I may shrug off scruples, say that they deserved it, or that I was having a bad day, etc. – but the results still remain. I may even get accustomed to acting in that way because it relieves my emotional tension or makes me feel I'm on top – but my mind will become insensitive, and I will lose friends. On the other hand, if I think about my actions, I may feel stricken with guilt and hate myself.

Effects therefore accrue in terms of states of mind – such as insensitivity or guilt – and also in terms of behaviour: in this example, I either become loud-mouthed or intensely self-critical. Then there are results in the wider social sphere: I get isolated or only associate with shallow, insensitive people. All of this can lead on to substance abuse and other self-destructive patterns.

All kamma rolls out in terms of behaviour patterns, psychological programs and strategies – *saṇkhārā* – of which intention (or impulse) is the prime agent. And if there is no clarity around kamma, even negative and uncomfortable programs – such as justification, blaming, distracting and switching off – can define how I operate and how I'm seen. Tendencies to be a compulsive doer, a busy and over-responsible one who doesn't take care of themselves, or defensive or somehow unworthy – are programs that become part of my identity. And as these programs become familiar, they bind the mind into ongoing habitual action – psychological, verbal and physical. The identity that they thus create is like a ball bouncing on a trampoline. Bouncing and being bounced: '*saṃsāra*', 'the wandering on', is what it's called.

Liberation is about not being bounced; and the fourth kind of kamma is the mental action that brings that around.

So if we want to get free, we have to get a hold on how *saṃsāra* works. We have to pause and approach our *saṇkhārā* from a different mind-set than the one they jumped out of: getting defensive about the tendency for denial, for example, is just a continuation of the same program. However, a different approach is possible – because the mind is not completely bonded to its programs. We can experience the results of unskilful actions, and with the support of our own trained attention and/or that of reliable friends, learn to do better.

We can change our ways. We can also realize the awareness that makes that possible, and that stands apart from kamma. Liberation from the feedback loop of action and result (*kamma-vipāka*) is therefore possible; it all comes down to training the mind.

Bodily, Verbal and Mental Kamma: The Causal Field

Mind mediates within our multi-faceted experience of 'external' and 'internal' realms. What I'm referring to as 'external' is the range of sense-data that provides details of where we are; whereas the 'internal' consists of our inclinations, moods, memories and attitudes. Similarly, mind has an external aspect, *manas*, that scans the senses and through its focus shapes experience into discrete objects; and it also has as an internal, or subjective, aspect, *citta* (pronounced 'chitta'), that adds how we are affected by these objects. For the sake of clarity, I'll call *citta* the 'heart' of the mental process.

Citta isn't rational; it's an affective-responsive awareness that is attuned to respond to its environment – physical or psychological – at a gut and heart level, with 'fight-flight-freeze' drives that can kick in at a moment's notice. Basically it's attracted to pleasure and tries to get away from pain – and those impulses, along with the thoughts that they stimulate, make experience very dynamic. Indeed: dealing with the changing state of the world around us –

and the 'world' within us – keeps us pretty busy.

Taken as a whole, these external and internal realms make up a causal field. This field is the sum total of experience that's caused by our living context of sensory life, society and family; and it also causes – that is, it's sensitive and responsive to that context. Consciousness acts as the one-moment-at-a time link between these two realms, with mental consciousness (*mano-viññāṇa*) adding its interpretations to sights and sounds and the rest. That is, this mental activity tags input from the external senses with perceptions (*saññā*) that affect the heart, such as: 'tastes good'; 'this carpet smells like an old dog'; 'she looks irritated.' These impressions and interpretations begin with the external mind, but get settled in the heart through the agreeable or disagreeable feeling (*vedanā*[*]) or the prior association it evokes. In other words, *citta* doesn't receive sights, sounds, smells and tastes; it receives the perceptions that mind-consciousness brings in.[**]

Consequently, the pairing of the objective mind and subjective heart builds meaning. The spiritual quest is based on the understanding that there is ageing, sickness and death; and with that the experience of separation from the loved, and being disagreeably affected by these facts of life – while at the same time being powerless to do much about it. Even on the level of daily life, what we think about, and how we conceive of people and things, washes over the heart with pleasant or unpleasant feeling, arouses gladness or disappointment, and may lead us into action. This is how the world of sights and sounds and people and events gets into us and gets us going (even when the event happened long ago). The inheritance, the *vipāka* or 'old kamma' of being born, is that whether the mind interprets things accurately or not, the heart stores its interpretations. And it bases intentions, responses and reactions – kamma – on those stored-up meanings. It's a questionable basis.

The basis is as much psychological as sensorial. We need to, and do, seek to understand and otherwise manage our circumstances. Therefore, one of our most continual mental actions is that of interpreting and filing away experience to derive meaning and purpose. And, as with other creatures, part of that meaning and

purpose has to do with getting support from, or participating within, a group. In our case, this 'belonging' also entails participation in a complex weave of social programs, customs and attitudes that tell us how to operate in order to be accepted. This also affects our kamma, because although some advice is wise, we may also act upon socially-derived prejudices that cause us to contribute to hurting others – so we become arrogant or insensitive. Some social customs are about bypassing uncomfortable truths (such as mortality), or not giving deep attention to the heart: a life of golf and parties fails to come to terms with the facts of life. Another big effect comes from the views and opinions of others: being praised or blamed, valued or neglected, lingers as perceptions by which we sense ourselves. This self-reference then becomes an identity. As a general principle then, how we have been (and are being) affected by others solidifies into who we are.

This psychological program of being affected and responding is called the 'mental (or heart) formation' (*citta-saṇkhāra*).

Installed at birth, at any given moment this 'master program' responds to present experience in terms of what it has learnt that experience is like. It is informed through a library of perceptions, or 'felt meanings', that the *manas* aspect has encoded, even though these perceptions are all only representations of an object, an event, or of course a person. And also *saññā* adds subjective tints to any object-definition, such as: 'Will she like me?', 'He looks threatening' – and so on. These tinted perceptions become the basis of many spur-of-the-moment responses in our lives.

Meanwhile, the mind has responded on many fronts: we may be involved with business, but are challenged by the result of hearing of a relative's death an hour ago. Even as we struggle with this, other long-term aims or social obligations apply their pressure. Bodily health and energy also have their effects. In addition to this, our attention span fluctuates, particularly if we're tired – so we can be running on automatic, attending in a habitual or blurred way, and acting on outdated or biased programs. Rather like the tides of an ocean that can lift us up, engulf us, or sweep us in any direction, this kammic process is then a dynamic field of the interplay between established aims, former or current input, and responses to

any of these. The mind-sets, attitudes and interpretations that have become established in our hearts carry the potential to shape our present actions; and the future will arise according to whichever mixture of these effects we act upon.

Steering Through the Causal Field

From the above, you'll see that kamma is potent and multi-dimensional. Steering through its causal field is possible, but it does require a reliable and trained mind; training is then an imperative. Dark kamma weakens the mind and destroys people; bright kamma is a source of strength and nourishment. On account of bright kamma, such as ethical integrity and goodwill, we can establish the calm and clarity that supports training *manas* and *citta*. Together, these two aspects of mind can then handle, understand and release the causal tangle.

> **Look after yourself!**
>
> 'And for the sake of what benefit should a woman or a man, a householder or one gone forth, often reflect thus: "I am the owner of my kamma, the heir of my kamma; I have kamma as my origin, kamma as my relative, kamma as my resort; I will be the heir of whatever kamma, good or bad, that I do"? People engage in misconduct by body, speech, and mind. But when one often reflects upon this theme, such misconduct is either completely abandoned or diminished.'
>
> (A.5:57; B. Bodhi, Trans.)

So kamma is not an imprisonment, but a matter to be mastered. Firstly, if we must generate kamma, we can at least determine whether it will be bright or dark. Remember, there's a choice: kamma depends on impulse or intention – but 'intention' is not just a deliberate plan; in fact, we're not always that clear about what we're doing and why. Many of our troubles come from just being preoccupied, or getting stuck in habits, or from inattention or misunderstanding; then intention is not guided by clarity.

Complacency or, on the other hand, pessimistic fatalism may also weaken the clarity and firmness of intention.

We might wonder why we are who we are and what made us like this, but such speculation just activates the mind to no good end. The details of kamma are too complex to understand – it would be like trying to figure out which river or rain-cloud gave rise to which drop of water in the ocean.[4] The most direct and helpful way to steer kamma begins with 'right view' (*sammā-diṭṭhi*). Right view is the view that there is the bad and it can be steered away from, and there is the good and it can be cultivated. And cultivation entails training one's attention. An attention that's firm, clear and not flustered by moods and sensations can enter the underlying currents of the mind and turn a tide of heedlessness and self-obsession that would otherwise steer intention. In this way, right view leads into 'right attitude' (*sammā-saṇkappā*), which is the aim to set one's attention on a skilful footing. With these two steps, the Eightfold Path out of suffering and stress gets established.[5]

The first responsible and accessible action on this Path is to pause on an emotional response and ask yourself whether this response is reliable and aims in a wholesome direction. Even this brief breaking of the reactive link that engages fresh intention with an old habit, if done repeatedly, can dissolve that link and cause that mental habit to cease. You find that you don't have to retort, that you don't have to rush to the deadline, and you don't have to binge. Then different responses can arise – such as patience, forgiveness and tolerance. In ways like this, you can get out of the gridlock of 'I'm stuck in this habit; I am this', and make meaningful choices in your life.

The basis of any such choices is gaining the capacity to choose. And this heedfulness (*appamāda*) is what pausing and considering offers: I can pause, come out of a mind-state, give it due consideration, and decide to act on it – or let its accompanying impulse pass. I don't have to be compulsive or reactive. Just taking this step, that of disengagement (*viveka*), opens the possibility for the fourth type of kamma, the kamma that leads to the end of kamma.[6] This is what 'liberation' and 'awakening' refer to.

Liberation Begins with Mutuality

Liberation begins with stepping back from what you're involved with in order to be clear with regard to your perceptions and intentions. If you witness your attitudes, thoughts and inclinations from a dispassionate perspective, you can guide the mind in ways that bring around bright results. To get off to a good start, you should first focus on ethical standards. In this respect, the Buddha advocated five precepts to train in: the undertaking to refrain from deliberately killing animals (that includes insects); to refrain from taking anything that isn't given; to refrain from non-consensual sexual activity; to refrain from harmful speech habits, such as deceit, gossip, swearing and the mindless chatter that clutters our own attention and that of other people; and to refrain from taking intoxicants such as alcohol and narcotics. Virtue is the necessary condition for a rightly centred mind.[7] It's about clarity and well-being – one's own and that of others.

So this is also not just a personal matter. Ethical clarity is about sparing others the abuse, manipulation and recklessness that devastate our human world and that stem from an ill-centred mind. Since we affect and steer others, or collude in other people's careless kamma, our actions have social repercussions. Moreover, because the effects of our actions in the external world may take years to occur, our rate of learning doesn't necessarily keep up with the rate at which we can commit further action. For example, we were polluting the atmosphere for decades before it became clear what was going on; by which time other actions had taken place – such as establishing industries and lifestyles dependent on unsustainable resources – that make it difficult to bring about change. Now we're in crisis.

Much of the damage is caused by a lack of deep attention (*yoniso manasikāra*). We don't always look into the cause and effects of attitudes, social structures and the actions they support. For example, it is socially acceptable to be insensitive with regard to other creatures, whether that is through hunting, fishing, or intensive farming. A competitive, materialistic economy supports hoarding, inequality, consumerism and theft. Fashion and beautification seem harmless enough, but they present models of bodies that many people can't match – and by which they are made to feel inferior. They also suggest that the body is a sexual

commodity – and that attitude supports abuse. As do movies that make violence a normal and thrilling aspect of human behaviour. Wrong speech is rampant in the political and advertising worlds; and blurring the mind with intoxicants is a standard means of relaxing and socializing. What does 'drink responsibly' actually mean? Do you ever ask yourself what future our social models and norms lead to? Couldn't we aim for something brighter?

With pausing, reflecting on, and questioning one's actions, the roots of some of them can be revealed as based on self-interest, gain or wanting stimulation. Other motivations, however, take more scrutiny and hide beneath a biased viewpoint or a false assumption. These might be: 'It's my right to hunt animals'; 'You can't expect a woman to run a country'; 'Arabs can't be trusted'; 'The idiot who lives next door …' These are the most difficult to investigate – because any negative view automatically bars wisely considering and respecting those whom the view dismisses. Such a mind isn't going to steer through the volatile field of cause and effect; it isn't even in touch with what that field is.

Awareness of the potential in this causal field encourages us to develop deep attention: a straight mind that's connected to a sensitive heart. This means that we incline towards mutually-based points of view, and place our inclinations and attitudes in line with what is both for our long-term welfare, and for that of others.[8]

This sense of mutuality – 'to others as to myself' – is the basis of ethics, and of bright kamma. But the Buddha also pointed to generosity (or sharing) as another wholesome quality that readily arises for people. Giving and sharing can be extended in terms of material things, hospitality, medical support and wise advice. They form the universal connections of goodwill, gratitude and compassion. Without parents sharing their bodily life and the results of their work with us, we wouldn't have been born, let alone survived. Acts of giving cross the cultures as being the standard way of meeting or celebrating others. Cultivated on a daily basis, acts of giving and sharing clear the heart of stinginess and hoarding. When we see what the gift of trust that keeping precepts offers to others, morality becomes a source of joy. And the giving of wise advice and teachings – Dhamma – bears the greatest fruit.[9] In brief, when

we're living in a mutuality-based world, our integrity, clarity and warm-heartedness have room to grow. The heart can open.

As it does so, goodwill – carrying qualities such as kindness and compassion – arises naturally. So it is: when the view is clear, bright kamma starts putting on some vigorous growth. And it all begins not even with affection, but with the mutual respect of 'to others as to myself.' This creates reliable friendships that act as counterweights to the tides of stress, isolation, ill health and hardship. Mutual support, a lifestyle based on clear attention and integrity, firms and gladdens the mind.

So the accumulative effect of reviewing and resetting our minds in line with bright kamma offers a lot. As bright kamma increases stability, self-respect and clarity, it makes it easier to detect heedless habits and restrain careless impulses. With a deep attention to the results of action, and an awareness of sharing this world with others, we realize that the value and happiness of the good heart surpass what we can derive from sense-contact. Changes therefore occur in terms of lifestyle: simplicity of needs and contentment become natural. On a planet that is being radically exhausted through materialism and consumerism, this can be a major contribution to everyone's welfare.

We also have to learn to linger and reflect on the good in our actions (it's easier to find faults!). And through right view, one that is attuned to bright and dark kamma, it gets easier to notice similar good in others. Right view isn't distracted by outward appearance or worldly values, and is non-judgemental – because it doesn't claim the dark (or the bright) to be myself, or yourself; the view is that these are universal qualities. So right view engenders the respect and compassion that support balanced relationships.

Deep attention and right view shift our perspective from self-concern to one that takes into account the entire human, in fact creaturely, condition. Then we're more fully inhabiting this life and this Earth. That in itself is a liberation from meaninglessness, self-obsession and social isolation. The simple guideline is: 'Less self-centred, the better I feel.' This point is an essential reference in Dhamma practice; it's pivotal to the kamma that ends kamma, the kamma of meditative cultivation.

Liberation Deepens with Mindfulness

This fourth kind of kamma is based on disengagement – disengagement from careless, compulsive or other unskilful impulses. The important qualifier is that heart and mind do also need to engage – with right view, and through mindfulness (*sati*).

Mindfulness is the action of pausing on the program and momentum of the mind and referring to it, not as 'me' and 'mine' and locked in, but with dispassion. This skill shifts the kammic drive out of its gear and gives us a choice. Mindfulness is generally set up with reference to the body – that is, by attuning to the overall sense of the body in terms of its form and energies. By not getting stuck in or reacting to sensations, the mind can focus on bodily energy as it settles; then one can adjust the mental energy of intention so that it is in sync with the more settled energy of the body. The body can relax its energy a lot more readily than the mind, and in this way, through mindfulness, the body helps to free the mind from its scurry or slump. This is the foundation for the mental kamma of meditation.[10]

With this foundational practice, you steady and brighten your body through posture and breathing, then you let your mind get the feel of that. You gather awareness around your body as if it's a sensitive and mysterious creature: listening to, and with, your body. Try to cover the entire body in a wide span – and if things feel unsettled, widen further, and sweep your awareness down your back and into the ground. How does it feel? But above all, be receptive and patient. Steady attentiveness, non-reactivity and patience are the basis of the mindfulness.

With a mindful review, you'll notice that a proportion of mental activity is unnecessary, stressful, and consisting of ricochets and reactions. None of which feels very good. So the first aim of meditation is to firm up the intention; to get grounded and let the mind relax any superfluous activity. To support this, you might engage the conceiving mind with skilful activity, such as bringing to mind a memory of a person – or an image – that gives rise to uplift or calm or gratitude. If you slowly but repeatedly dwell on the tone of such perceptions, the mind will disengage from its obsessions; it

gets steadier and more comfortable. With that lessening of pressure, you can also begin to attune to the tonality, the 'feel' of thoughts and inclinations. You thereby get a feel for the bright or dark quality that they bring into the mind; and that helps you to be clear as to what to act upon, and how.

Over time, you'll sense the feeling tone that bright thought and intention bring to the heart – and you'll also begin to notice the somatic sense of uplift, ease and stability that accompanies a skilful mental state. So rather than through relying on a notion or a theory that promises well-being, it's in the directly experienced harmony of body, thought and heart that you find a sense of deep assurance. Gladness (*pamojjha*) arises; you're experiencing the results of bright kamma, here and now. You can then know that the mind has settled into something that you can rely upon as a guide for daily life.

The guiding theme that becomes right attitude is that the mind steers away from sensual desire, malice and cruelty.[11] Mindfulness supports this when it is directed to the heart, where intention and response arise. Just as violent or callous intentions feel harsh, warm inclinations are food for the heart. What really counts then is intention. Moods, feelings, health and success come and go – but intention is something you can have some say over. Intention, the immediate kamma of the mind, can generate the inner skills that take you through the rolling waves of life. And you can feel it. Hence what to look for is not the feeling that arises from sense-contact, but that which accompanies intention. This, along with the brightness and steadiness of skilful intention, encourages you to keep steering with clear awareness, and keep putting aside blurred assumptions or negative views. Your potential for good heart increases accordingly.

Referring to the feeling tone of intention gets you to linger in its quality and establish that (rather than worldly success, for example) as the future reference. This is wise, because when you make a commitment to anything, there are going to be times when the commitment brings up discomfort – whether it's a resolve to exercise your body, or sit in meditation, or quit smoking. So keep recollecting your attitude and aim: get in touch with where your commitment came from. Sense its bright intention and deepen your

awareness of that. As your mind and heart pick up that theme, you can follow through with a motivation (*chandā*) that gets you through the mood swings, or the disorientation that comes with giving up old habits.

As the ongoing practice of meditation calms and steadies the mind, it allows us to direct an open attention to thoughts and moods, pausing, and receiving them without shrugging them off and without judgement. We stay present and calmly attend to the mental flow. That cool perspective on thoughts and inclinations allows a simple question to be placed directly into the heart: 'Is the state or view or program taking me into suffering and stress or out of it?' But the practice is to avoid thinking of an answer; instead, just notice what occurs in terms of the mental tone – does it calm and get clear or does it get agitated or tense? And how is that in your body? What if you relax in your body, return to the cool perspective and review the topic from there? At a certain point, a straightforward response – whether that means letting go, or applying more resolve and energy – will arise in the heart. You can figure out the details from there.

Stopping Kamma

To sum up the action that leads to liberation: it's about eliminating the source of stress-producing programs. That is, as our minds get clearer, we realize that stress, anxiety and loneliness all cluster around a strong 'me' sense. And this 'me' is fundamentally concerned with matters such as control, appearance and independence. We may assume that firming up in these areas will make us feel acceptable and confident … and yet even when I can get my way and look good, there is the need to perpetuate how I get my way and stop other people from frustrating me. Or there's the push to get out of my history and its disasters. In brief, the stress doesn't stop by following that 'self-view'. However, these programs don't come from or result in my becoming stable and contented, since self-view sometimes wants to be this and in other situations wants to be that.

The process of 'me being this and becoming that' can nevertheless be reviewed with mindful awareness. 'Being this', 'becoming that',

or even ‘needing to be’ is a program, not a person. It’s the program by which kamma forms a person.[12] It certainly has a drive to it – compulsive, itchy, craving, even desperate: ‘thirst’ (*taṇhā*) is what the Buddha called that drive. Yet craving is another program, and, like becoming (*bhava*), it’s an activity that can be stopped.

However, stopping this craving and becoming process is not a matter of suppression. Its basic hunger needs to be met with spiritual food. Suppression adds a negative twist, one that doesn’t bring that fulfilment. What is needed is to get the feel and the bright tone of wise intention. When the heart opens with that, it is no longer so hungry for the compulsive energy and glittering images of craving. Heart energy then moves away from these sources of habit, and enables the mind to witness rather than act or react. Mental kamma is such that even five minutes of neither acting on nor suppressing the present mind-state results in some ease. It’s only a start, but through doing just this and turning attention towards the witnessing, we begin to recognize a natural sanity, a seed of awakening that can steady us when the doing stops.

When you practise this on a regular basis you notice that the mind can have a different direction from zigzagging forwards (or backwards). It can open into a non-verbal awareness. In that opening, there is a change of perspective: awareness is experienced as a field within which thoughts, moods and sensations come and go. And the less there is the action of a buzzy, urgent self to keep things rolling, the less you act in terms of habitual responses and reactions. The mind can then be warmed, uplifted and led out of the tangle.

This, in a nutshell, is a description of how the kamma of cultivation leads to liberation. It’s always possible, it leads out of suffering and stress – but because we do lose track, we need reminders, support and practice.

* The English word ‘feeling’ covers a broader range of experience than is encompassed by the Pali *vedanā*. Whereas ‘feeling’ can mean ‘sensitive to’ or ‘an emotion’, *vedanā* specifically refers to the agreeable or disagreeable tone of a sensation or a mental perception.

** Also, some reactive impulses are based on the body’s reflexes, and bypass *manas* altogether.

1 … some feelings arise based on phlegm … based on internal winds … based on an imbalance of bodily humours … from the change of the seasons … from uneven care of the body … from assaults … from the result of kamma. That some feelings arise from the result of kamma one can know for oneself, and everyone understands that to be true. Now any contemplatives or sages who are of the doctrine and view that whatever an individual feels – pleasure, pain, neither-pleasure-nor-pain – is entirely caused by what was done before – overstep what they themselves know, and what is agreed on by people in general. Therefore I say that those contemplatives or sages are wrong.’ S.36:21 (See also M.136.)

2 ‘It is [intention] volition, bhikkhus, that I call kamma.’ A.6:63. ‘Intention’ or ‘volition’ (*cetanā*) does not necessarily require deliberation. *Cetanā* refers to the ‘bent’ or the ‘intent’ of the heart, which underlies thinking and powers emotion.

3 ‘Of these three kinds of action … I describe mental action as the most reprehensible for the performance of evil action, and not so much bodily or verbal action.’ M.56

4 According to A.4:77, the exact working out of kamma is one of the four ‘imponderables’, the pondering of which would lead to ‘madness or vexation’. The others are: the range of the power of a Buddha; the range of powers available to one in a state of absorption (*jhāna*); and the origin of the world.

5 Right view is considered paramount in many suttas, for example: ‘I do not see even a single thing on account of which unarisen wholesome qualities arise, and arisen wholesome qualities increase and expand as right view.’ A.1:307

Right view is described as: ‘There is what is given and what is offered and what is sacrificed; there is fruit and result of good and bad actions; there is this world and the other world; there is mother and father; there are beings who are reborn spontaneously; there are in this world good and virtuous contemplatives and sages who have realized for themselves by direct knowledge and declare this world and the other world.’ M.117:5

6 Dark, bright, both and the kamma that leads to the end of kamma: ‘And what is kamma that is neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright result, leading to the ending of kamma? The intention right there to abandon

this kamma that is dark with dark result … bright with bright result … dark and bright with dark and bright result.' A.4:232

According to M.57:7-11, of the four kinds of kamma, bright, dark and a mix of bright and dark originate from and give rise to a sense of self: 'Thus a being's appearance is due to a being.' However, the kamma that ends kamma is described simply as 'action that leads to the end of action.'

7 'Bhikkhus, (1) for a virtuous person, for one whose behaviour is virtuous, (2) right concentration possesses its proximate cause. When there is right concentration, for one possessing right concentration, (3) the knowledge and vision of things as they really are possesses its proximate cause. When there is the knowledge and vision of things as they really are, for one possessing the knowledge and vision of things as they really are, (4) disenchantment and dispassion possess their proximate cause. When there is disenchantment and dispassion, for one possessing disenchantment and dispassion, (5) the knowledge and vision of liberation possesses its proximate cause.' A.5:24

8 'when passion … hatred … delusion are abandoned, one's inclinations are not for one's own harm nor for the harm of others, nor for the harm of both; and one does not experience in one's own mind suffering and grief. In this way … nibbāna is directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, worthy of application, to be experienced individually by the wise.' A.3:55

9 ‘Bhikkhus, if beings knew, as I know, the result of giving and sharing, they would not eat without having given, nor would they allow the stain of meanness to obsess them and take root in their minds. Even if it were their last morsel, their last mouthful, they would not eat without having shared it, if there were someone to share it with.’ Iti. 26

‘Of these two kinds of giving, this is the foremost, namely, the giving of the Dhamma. There are these two kinds of sharing: the sharing of material things and the sharing of the Dhamma. Of these two kinds of sharing, this is the foremost, namely, the sharing of the Dhamma. There are these two kinds of help: help with material things and help with the Dhamma. Of these two kinds of help, this is the foremost, namely, help with the Dhamma.’ Iti. 98

10 ‘Bhikkhus, one thing, when developed and cultivated leads to great urgency … great benefit … great sanctuary … mindfulness and awareness … gaining knowledge and vision … blissful meditation in the present life … the realization of the fruit of knowledge and freedom. What one thing? Mindfulness of the body. This one thing, when developed and cultivated, leads to great urgency … great benefit … great sanctuary … mindfulness and awareness … gaining knowledge and vision … a happy abiding in the present life … the realization of the fruit of knowledge and freedom.’ A.1:576-582

11 Right attitude is an aim that is devoid of, or turns away from, sensual desire, harming and cruelty. See M.19. It’s

significant that two of these three bases are aversive.

12 ‘Thus, Ānanda, for beings hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, kamma is the field, consciousness the seed, and craving the moisture for their volition and aspiration to be established in an inferior … middling … superior realm. In this way, there is the production of renewed [becoming]/existence in the future. It is in this way, Ānanda, that there is [becoming]/existence.’ A.3:77

Meditation

Settling in Place

Sit still in a quiet and settled place in a way that feels comfortable but alert. Relax your eyes, but let them stay open or half-open with a soft focus. Be aware of the sensation of your eyeballs resting in the eye-sockets (rather than focusing on what you can see). Be sensitive to the tendency for the eyes to fidget, and keep relaxing that. As an alternative, you may find it helpful to let your gaze rest on a suitable object, such as a view into the distance. Avoid an intense scrutiny.

Then bring your attention to the sensations in your hands, then your jaw. See if they, too, can take a break from being ready to act or be on guard. Let your tongue rest on the floor of your mouth. Then sweep that relaxing attention from the corners of the eyes and around the head, as if you were unfastening a bandana. Let the scalp feel free.

When you feel settled, let your eyes close. As you relax around your head and face, bring that quality of attention slowly, gradually, down over your throat. Loosen up there, as if allowing each out-breath to sound an inaudible drone. If you begin to feel dreamy, or even sleepy, bring your attention to your lower back and lightly drawing the spine in, let that lift and open your chest.

Linger a while with that, sensing the body and the mental focus and receptivity, with no other aim than this. It's like reading a pulse, but with your attention hovering above your skin. Can you move that focus as if you are scanning that area of your body? If so, slowly sweep that attention down your body, rather like drawing a spacious loop of listening around the form, or stroking a cat. Notice the harder and softer areas of the body. Keep going in an unhurried manner until you get to the soles of your feet. In this way, build up a whole sense of the body at ease.

Keeping in touch with your body as an entire form, be aware of the flow of thoughts and emotions that pass through the mind. Listen to

them as if you're listening to flowing water, or the sea. If you find yourself reacting to them, bring your attention to the out-breath, and relax around the eyes, and forehead, and in the palms of the hands.

Practise stepping back, or disengaging, from any thoughts and emotions that arise. Don't add to them; let them pass. Whenever you do that, notice the sense of spaciousness, however brief, that seems to be there, behind the thoughts and feelings. Attune to the peacefulness of that.

Notice how your body and mind are when you feel peacefulness. Linger in it. Sustain it through paying attention to how your body and mind are, rather than trying to hold on to it. Make a practice of quietly offering peace to the energies that pass through you.

2
Bright Kamma

The Blessing of Skilful Attention

Whoever cultivates goodness is made glad,
right now and in the future – such a one is
gladdened in both instances.
The purity of one's deeds, if carefully recollected,
is a cause for gladness and joy.

Dhammapada: 'The Pairs', 16

In the last few weeks, a Buddha-image has been created in this monastery by Ajahn Nonti.[*] He's a renowned sculptor in Thailand, and he came to Cittaviveka to fashion this image as an act of generosity. It's been a lovely occasion because the Buddha-image is being made in a friendly and enjoyable way. Many people have been able to join in and help with it. Yesterday there were nine people at work sanding the Buddha-image. It's not *that* big, yet nine people were scrubbing away on it, and enjoying doing that together.

Bright and Dark Kamma Arise from the Heart

Nine people working together in a friendly way is a good thing to have happening. Moreover, the work was all voluntary, and came about with no prior arrangement: people got interested in the project and gathered around it. It's because of what the Buddha represents, and because people love to participate in good causes. That's the magic of bright kamma. It arises around doing something which will have long-term significance, and also from acting in a way that feels 'bright' rather than intense or compulsive. Kamma – intentional or volitional action – always has a result or residue, and here it's obvious that the bright kamma is having good results. There's an immediate result – people are feeling happy through working together. And there's a long-term result – they are doing

something that will bring benefit to others.

In a few days we hope to install the Buddha-image in the meditation hall. It's an image that makes me feel good when I look at it. It has a soft, inviting quality that brings up a sense of feeling welcome and relaxed. This is a very good reminder for meditation. Sometimes people can get tense about 'enlightenment', and that brings up worries, pressure, and all kinds of views; but often what we really need is to feel welcomed and blessed. This is quite a turnaround from our normal mind-set; but when we are sitting somewhere where we feel trusted, where there's benevolence around us, we can let ourselves open up. And as we open our hearts, we can sense a clarity of presence, and firm up around that. This firmness arising from gentleness is what the Buddha-image stands for. It reminds us that there was an historical Buddha whose awakening is still glowing through the ages – but when this is also presented as a heart-impression in the here and now, rather than as a piece of history, it carries more resonance. Then the image serves as a direct impression of what bright kamma feels like.

'Bright' kamma is the term used in the scriptures to denote good action, or that which leads to positive results. This is not a theory or a legal judgement; if you linger in the heart behind skilful actions, you can feel a bright, uplifting tone. Bright kamma is steady and imparts clarity; it has an energy that's conducive to meditation. Dark kamma, on the other hand, lacks clarity and feels corrosive. As it makes the heart feel so unpleasant, mostly attention doesn't want to go there; the heart gets jittery and distracts instead. So this is something to check inwardly: can we rest and comfortably bear witness to the heart behind our actions? Do our thoughts and impulses come from a bright or dark state? Even in the case of owning up to some painful truth about our actions, isn't there a brightness, a certain dignity, when we do that willingly? Look for brightness in occasions when your heart comes forth rather than in times of superficial ease or of being dutifully good. That bright, steady tone, rather than casualness or pressurized obedience, indicates the best basis for action.

Sense and Meaning: The Perceptual Process

The energy of kamma originates in the heart, *citta*. It can move out through body (*kāya*) and speech (*vāca* – which includes the 'internal speech' of thinking) and mind (*manas*). Both *manas* and *citta* can be translated as 'mind', but the terms refer to different mental functions. '*Manas'* refers to the mental organ that focuses on the input of any of the senses. This action is called 'attention' (*manasikāra*). So *manas* defines and articulates; it scans the other senses and translates them into perceptions and concepts (*saññā*). Tonally, it's quite neutral. It's not happy or sad; in itself, it just defines: 'That's that.'

Citta, on the other hand, is the awareness that receives the impressions that attention has brought to it, is affected and responds. It adds pleasure and pain to the perceptions that *manas* delivers, and these effects generate mind-states of varying degrees of happiness and unhappiness. Owing to this emotional aspect, I refer to *citta* as 'heart'. Note that *citta* doesn't access the senses directly. Instead, it adds feeling to the perceptions that attention has brought it; but with that, the initial moment of perception gets intensified to give a 'felt sense'. This is a simple note such as 'smooth', 'glowing', 'foggy', 'intense'. Then as attention rapidly gathers around that sense, a felt meaning crystallizes. For example, *manas* may decide that an orange-coloured globe of a certain size is probably an orange. From that meaning, further felt senses such as 'tasty, healthy' may arise and resonate in the heart. So a mind-state based on desire arises. And even though all this originates in mere interpretations, intention springs up – and *citta* moves attention, intention and body towards the orange with an interest in eating it.

In this way, impulse/intention occurs as a response to a felt meaning that itself has been conjured up by a graduated and felt perceptual process. This is how mental kamma arises. And the result of *citta* being affected in this way is that the meaning is established as a reference point. Then the next time I see or think of an orange, that established perception that 'Oranges are tasty; they're good for me' becomes the starting point for action. But is that interpretation always correct? Ever bitten into a rotten orange, or been fooled by a plastic replica? More significantly, don't perceptions of people need a good amount of adjustment over time? How true is perception?

Perception is initiated when attention turns towards a particular sense-object. So all contact depends on attention. Take the case of when you're intensely focused on reading a book or watching a movie: awareness of your body, of the pressure of the chair, and maybe even a minor ache or pain, disappears. The mind's attention is absorbed in seeing and processing the seen, so other impressions don't get registered.Contact with the chair has disappeared because one's attention was elsewhere.[13] How real then is contact?

Contact is actually of two kinds. The contact that occurs when the mind registers something touching the senses is called 'disturbance-contact' (*paṭigha-phassa*). But when *manas* 'touches' the *citta* at a sensitive point, 'designation-contact' (*adhivacana-phassa*) is evoked – along with a felt sense.[14] Disturbance-contact occurs in the mind-organ, and designation-contact occurs in the heart; and it is designation-contact, the heart's impression, rather than contact with something external, that both moves us and stays with us as a meaning. For example, 'dog' is tonally a neutral perception that we would agree upon as a definition of a certain kind of animal. But in terms of *citta*, that 'dog' could mean 'savage creature that can bite or has bitten me' or 'loyal, cuddly friend that will protect me.' Such contact is therefore formed by previous action, but present-day impulses and actions are based on it. Thus, the old perception shapes me; in this case, as a fearful or confident person. And I act from that basis. This is why it is said: '*Contact is the cause of kamma*.'[15]

To summarize: contact touches the *citta*, attention focuses it, and intention launches its response. This dynamic and formative process and the 'track' or 'formation' that it leaves in the *citta* is a *saṇkhāra* – the formative aspect of mental kamma, and what it forms. *Saṇkhārā* are crucial because they shape both action and actor – following their tracks, I become the tracker.

Now you could say that all meaning is factual: in the above instance, maybe a dog did bite me when I was four. That's why I see dogs like that, and it's quite reasonable. And it may well be the case that men in uniforms/red-headed women/people who talk fast (etc., etc.) have frightened me or let me down at some time or another. And it may also be the case that my fear or suspicion is

based purely on somebody else's opinion. But what the Buddha is pointing to is not historical circumstance or the attitudes of others – over which we have no say – but how fresh action arises when the felt sense that comes with designation-contact pushes a button on the *citta* and the established meaning jumps up.

What we might be encouraged to do then, is not to run away from, poison, slander, or get paranoid about dogs or people, but to handle the felt meaning and assess its validity in the here and now. Because to base one's responses on one piece of data alone, even though it touches a sensitive spot, is only going to intensify the impression and bind you to it. Yes, as that's a sensitive spot, that felt meaning should be responded to – but with skilful attention both to the actual dog, now ('Is this dog, here and now, growling or baring its teeth? Or just sniffing around?'), and to your state of mind (feel the fear and pause on reacting to it). This is the kamma of handling and reviewing contact, attention and impulse – the kamma that leads to the end of further kamma (from that historical bias, at any rate).

Otherwise it can be the case that even when there are no dogs (and so on) around, one can still be anxious that one might come by soon. Sounds ridiculous? No, paranoia is part of social life, even encouraged: look out for 'suspicious' people, Communists, radicals, atheists, men wearing hoodies, etc. ... and when the *citta* collapses under all this, it's chronic anxiety and medication.

However, if we at least get the idea that these felt meanings are established in the *citta*, not in the object, we might also acknowledge the possibility that these historically-based perceptions could be reset or disbanded; also that positive ones – such as those associated with goodwill, generosity, integrity, and the many qualities perfected by the Buddha, proclaimed in his Dhamma teachings, and practised by his disciples – could be established. These perceptions can help the heart settle and bring forth the truth of its own goodness. This is the rationale behind devotion and recollection.

Puja: Ritual that Brightens the Heart

In Buddhism, and in other religions, access to and dwelling in the heart-tone of bright kamma is occasioned by devotion and recollection. In Buddhism, this is called '*pūja*' – an act of raising up, and honouring that which is worthy of our respect. The very fact that there are human models and actions that one can feel deep respect for is itself a blessing to take note of: honouring opens and uplifts the heart. With *pūja*, we attend to a skilful felt meaning, linger there and allow the effects to nourish the *citta*. From this basis, it's likely that inclinations or even specific ideas in line with bright kamma will arise. Either that, or the mind easily settles into a state that supports meditation. This is how and why one should linger in any bright kamma.

So in the act of honouring the Buddha, one first opens the heart in respect and brings to mind the meaning of an Awakened One: someone of deep clarity; a speaker of truths that penetrate and bring healing to the human condition; one accomplished in understanding and action – a sage whose teachings can still be tested and put into action. If one has a Buddha-image, it's something that should be held with respect – one cleans it, illuminates it with light, and offers flowers and incense to it. We place it on an altar, bow to it and chant recollections and teachings.

This is not a mindless activity; we use ritual means and resound words and phrases because this full engagement embodies and strengthens the quality of respect in a way that thinking can't. With the openness of heart that these attitudes bring, any aspect of the teaching that's brought to mind goes deeper. The act of offering that begins a *pūja* is a case in point: offering flowers symbolizes bringing forth virtue, offering light is about bringing forth clarity, and incense does the same for meditative concentration. In this way, *pūja* introduces the heart to important Dhamma themes.

Pūja is especially helpful when people perform it as a group. Then we are participating in the Dhamma as both the expression and the Way of awakening, as well as in the collective commitment to, and engagement with, that Dhamma. This collective engagement ritualizes the 'Sangha', that is, the assembly of disciples. Chanting in a group has a harmonizing, settling effect: sonorous and unhurried, it steadies bodily and mental energies and supports an atmosphere

of harmony with fellow practitioners. Tuning in and participating brings us out of ourselves and into a deep resonance with heart-impressions of the sacred. We can be touched by a sense of timeless stability, purpose and beauty. If these intentions, felt senses and recollections are established regularly, we know where to find good heart, how to attend to it, and how to allow ourselves to be uplifted. Such kamma feels bright.

The Benefits of Recollection

> 'At any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting the Tathāgata ... the Dhamma ... the Sangha ... their own virtues: "[They are] untorn, unbroken, unspotted, unsplattered, liberating, praised by the wise, untarnished, conducive to concentration." At any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting virtue, his mind is not overcome with passion, not overcome with aversion, not overcome with delusion. His mind heads straight, based on virtue. And when the mind is headed straight, the disciple of the noble ones gains a sense of the goal, gains a sense of the Dhamma, gains joy connected with the Dhamma. In one who is joyful, rapture arises. In one who is rapturous, the body grows calm. One whose body is calmed experiences ease. In one at ease, the mind becomes concentrated.
>
> 'Mahānāma, you should develop this recollection of virtue while you are walking, while you are standing, while you are sitting, while you are lying down, while you are busy at work, while you are resting in your home crowded with children.'
>
> (A.11:12; B. BODHI, TRANS.)

The expressions that are used in recollecting Dhamma are that it is experienced directly (not just as a theory), is of timeless significance, and is accessible and furthering for those who practise it. So that gives us an encouragement to look into what the Buddha taught and modelled: the way to the end of suffering and stress. With this, we recollect aspiration, learning and commitment as our common touchstone, and suffering and ignorance as our common challenge. Then we no longer feel so alone with our difficult mind-

states, and we can handle them in a more open and aware way. Recollection of Sangha reminds us that although there is greed, anger and confusion in the human world, there are also people who cultivate a way out of that.

If you use *pūja* on a regular basis, it aligns you to the 'Triple Gem' – Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha – by presenting content in terms of images, ideas and themes, and values and practices that guide the heart. It also occasions acts of steering and composing attention. So *pūja* works both on what the mind is dealing with, and how it operates.

The Skills of Attention

Obviously there's a lot more to anyone's life than doing *pūja*, but such ritual does support training in attention – the what and the how of experience – as well as in contact and intention. Important qualities in this training are deep attention, mindfulness and full knowing (*sampajañña*); they provide a skilful container and stable reference to the ongoing flow of experience. With these, we have some say over where our minds are running and how.

The what and the how of attention are co-dependent. Any kind of attention selects certain data from a wide range. It seeks content. But if, for example, you review your visual experience, you'll note that although there is a wide field of seeing, the mind selects only a small portion of that to focus the eyes on. Then whatever attention has focused on leads the mind and affects the heart. How we attend selects what we notice, and what we notice affects how we attend – and that determines where the mind will go and what action will ensue. In detail: an underlying intention steers what attention selects, and through the twofold process of contact, a mind-state is born that sends out a train of thought.[16] For example, an architect sees a house and notices the design and structure; a burglar sees it and notices the windows and doors. Even if the architect and the burglar don't follow through with physical action, their hearts will have been aroused in certain ways and their minds will have considered and calculated. This mental process conditions their behaviour and even who they experience themselves as being. In abstract: underlying intention steers attention, attention gives rise

to contact, and contact generates meaning and intention. Intention, attention and contact are all *saṇkhārā*; they lay down or strengthen a track of mental kamma – and with that, the sense of 'I am' is born.

So deep attention arises with the intention to consider how a perception of the scenario is affecting the *citta*. Rather than just reacting to sense-contact (including that of thought), you listen more deeply and sift through the flood of interpretations or digressions with an attention that looks into whether the sight, sound or thought (and so on) is useful or relevant, what the arousing or threatening feature of it is, and whether that sign is to be followed or not. Whereas untrained attention is like a bird that rapidly picks up any crumb and hastily moves onto the next crumb, deep attention is like a baleen whale that, while steering towards food, allows the ocean to pass through its mouth, catching edible krill in its baleen and letting everything else pass. This kind of attention is not judgemental, but it filters and gets to the point, and thus moderates the psychologies that direct your life.[17]

This process reveals underlying biases – such as gratification impulses or impressions of being threatened – and it may also reveal unquestioned assumptions that program how we think and what we think about. So, if deep attention is strong, we can put analysis and further action on hold; we don't try to fix things; we don't go spasming into an opinion about ourselves based on that survey. And the simple beauty of this process is that when we suspend the reactions of what we assume we should and shouldn't be feeling, there is clarity and spaciousness. That gives room for compassion or dispassion to arise.

Deep attention gets strengthened by mindfulness. Mindfulness is the ability to bear a theme, mood, thought or sensation in mind; it is defined in the discourses as '[one] bears in mind and recollects what was done and said long ago.'[**] When it is based on right view, 'right' mindfulness can linger on what deep attention locates in a way that corresponds to that view of cause and effect. For example, as it meets unskilful qualities like anger or greed, right mindfulness will bring around restraint and relinquishment; and as it meets skilful qualities such as generosity or truthfulness, the right view behind right mindfulness will support appreciation and

lingering.

The steadying effect of mindfulness also allows for a fuller kind of knowing. This full knowing is of knowing qualities (*dhammā*) just as they are – void of the inference of 'me, mine and myself'. Through freeing thoughts and moods from the reactive process of taking them personally, full knowing allows them to arise and pass. It's also holistic and knows how the heart is being affected. So, if the mind is getting overwhelmed or strained, full knowing may determine a shift of attention or of attitude. Guided by this, we may turn our minds to a more useful topic, or shift our attitude away from the notion of 'making progress' towards the practice of patience, inquiry and receptivity.

Without the filtering of deep attention, the mind loses direction and authority; without the lingering effect of mindfulness, there can be no steadying and moderating; and without full knowing, there would be no liberating insight. Instead, felt senses, meanings and mental feeling will tend to flood the *citta*, and become 'What can I do? I'm stuck. I always will be ...' and thereby block a skilful response. But with the wisdom that trained attention brings, the first response we make is not to say or do something, but rather to firm up skilful qualities in the mind – and let go of reactions or hurtful responses.

Consider the alternative: if I focus on my mental impressions and states through unprepared, insecure or biased attention, or view the world and others from the same basis, the more potent and firmly established afflictive meanings get. If I listen with an unsympathetic ear, or look with a critical stare, pre-judge, or fixate on what others do and say – all that will lead to suffering and stress. This is because such attention notices what it's become accustomed to notice: her gracious demeanour (so much better than mine!), his irritating mannerisms (why can't he be normal, like me?), my frustration at her inability to listen to me (just like my mother!), etc. It's all about me; and it's particularly sensitive to what I find uncomfortable. But if that's all I notice, I get fixated on it, and these fixations psychologically locate me. I feel that 'he's always this way' or I 'see' you in a certain way; or I only notice my bad habits. Careless, untrained attention is set to look out for old impressions, and is

particularly attuned to any perception that fits the biases and wounds in the heart. It's as if our wounds are looking for arrows to fill them. Thus when we grab hold of wounded meanings, mental kamma is laid down, and the old perception is affirmed. Or even intensified. But if you want to get to the end of this cycle of *kamma-vipāka*, you have to cultivate skilful attention within the heart.

Recollection: Dhamma Values Become Strengths

To establish mindfulness and full knowing in daily life relies on filtering the input of stuff coming at us from all directions, because the sheer deluge can overwhelm us. Because we build up *saṇkhāra* tracks and programs based on contact, we need to be responsible about what we give attention to. Part of cultivation therefore is about turning away from input and actions that pull the mind into craving or aversion or distraction. Hence the function of deep attention is to be discriminative. Rather than have the mind absorb into whatever is being pumped out by the media, we cultivate sense-restraint so that the *citta* doesn't compulsively go out into the sense-fields without a filter. As in cases like the following: you're walking down the street, or browsing the internet – do you need to gaze into the shop windows and advertisements? Does that hand you over to the consumer demon? Do you need to immediately switch on your phone as soon as you get up in the morning – get busy, get out there before you fully know where you are? With wise reflection, you can recognize a habitual *saṇkhāra*, and give attention to one or two long in-breaths and out-breaths to balance its impetus.[18]

Recollecting Dhamma themes adds further support to the mind and heart. As in the case of the Triple Gem, recollection entails bringing up a concept and dwelling on it steadily and repeatedly until it touches the *citta*. Then a felt sense is established that can steady, rein in or gladden the heart. This process goes deeper than merely thinking: people can think about anything without necessarily reflecting on how the heart has been affected. And we can forget to think deeply about what would serve us best – like attuning to integrity. So, when you have the five precepts, you can make a daily practice of checking in with the harmlessness, honesty, reliability and clarity that they signify, and what heart-tones they

give rise to. You may have wavered from these, but with recollection, you repeatedly bring them to mind, gain their meaning and settle into that. From there you can review your actions and attitudes towards other people, other creatures, and material resources: am I living with an attitude of respect towards the world I inhabit? Can I bring forth bright kamma – or at least turn away from dark kamma?

Once you've established values, you can recollect them, and linger on them until you feel the tonal qualities of non-violence, integrity, honesty, modesty, generosity and so on. These tones carry the energy of the value, and as you linger on them, you can discern a bodily effect: you feel cleaner, lighter and firmer. Worry, anger, passion and despair, on the other hand, have negative bodily effects. In simple instances like these you learn a useful truth: heart and body share the same energy, and the purity of the energy of bright intentions clears and strengthens them. This consolidated effect is called 'goodness', 'merit', or 'value' (*puñña*). *Puñña* steadies and supports you, not only when it comes to meditation, but also with resilience in the face of crisis. So the advice is to recollect bright intentions that you've sustained in the course of each day; linger on the goodness and let the *puñña* sustain you. Shifts can then happen – if you let them.

Beware of idealism though. With that attitude the mind grabs hold of the ideas, proliferates around them, and creates a self who does or doesn't have those qualities. All this contracts the heart and cuts off the body – until you lose touch with the body altogether. So when people are not in touch with the embodied feel of the good heart, there are quarrels over truth, peace, love and freedom and the like. Passions or fears get mixed up with those ideals; and as the heart contracts and clinging to a view occurs, a righteous self is born.

I remember an incident in the accommodation block of a centre during a silent meditation retreat when one night two people started arguing over the relative importance given to compassion in Tibetan or Theravada Buddhism, and which was more compassionate. They were talking so loudly that the person in the next room started beating on the wall to get them to be quiet!

Obviously, they missed the point: if you really get the feel of a value, you can't quarrel over who's more compassionate – because the grabbing, the contraction of the *citta* that accompanies attachment to a view, doesn't support a heart-opening quality like compassion. Needing to be right is a source of suffering!

Another heart-opening recollection is of mortality. This is because the perception of mortality causes some of the sticky stuff the mind contracts around to lose its grip. Where's the pressure to get, consume, or even be, something when everything you get, you lose? What is really worth giving time and attention to? If you are to die this very night, why hold grudges? Such recollection supports the quality of dispassion (*virāga*). With dispassion, we get a clear perspective: better centre attention in your values and your *puñña*. The recollection of mortality also reminds us that our energy, mental agility and health are finite and dwindling. We must use such resources in a way that will enhance or free our lives, or we will waste the time in fantasies and frustrations. Used wisely then, the recollection of death keeps the heart attuned to the good, the clear and the present.

One of the greatest sources of affliction and negative kamma is a loss of empathy with others. In modern urban life, we may experience many people through media stereotypes, or in the no man's land of busy streets and public places. People then become 'other' – other nationalities, other customs, etc. – and we may feel either nothing, or mistrust, for them. In a relational field with such a bias, indifference and brutality find room to breed. But if we consider the common ground – that, like us, others have to endure stress, illness, bereavement and death – this generates empathy (*anukampa*), the basis of all forms of goodwill. For example, a friend of mine recounted having a picture of famine victims and people with terrible afflictions, and whenever he was starting to feel irritable or lose perspective, he would look at these individuals. Then he'd experience a sense of compassion for the human realm, as well as gratitude for the blessing of being healthy, free from punishment and well-fed.

Can we see the actions of others in a more tolerant or reflective way? 'Other people' are experiences that can teach you a lot. We

can get good advice from wise people – and also learn from how they act and speak. Confused or misguided people can strengthen our patience and wisdom: 'She's showing me how not to act! Thank you!' And we can broaden empathy to recollect that 'others too have joy and despair, humour and fear, birth, families, and their kamma – then why don't I relate to others in the way that I'd like them to relate to me?' Morality is empathy in terms of behaviour.

Another classic recollection feels disturbing at first. It's the recollection of the unattractive aspects of the body (*asubha*); that is, the organs and fluids that lie under the skin: in fact, most of what makes up a body and keeps it going. The aim of this recollection is not to make us morbid, but to relieve the heart from obsession with the current notion of beauty. How much effort, time and money goes into glamourizing the most superficial aspect of our inheritance? How much anxiety, vanity, jealousy and passion does this give rise to? How much deep happiness or contentment can the outward appearance of the body bring? And as you can't see much of your own body, the outward appearance is for other people; it's not even 'your' body.

After the initial shock of recognizing what anyone's body consists of, what can arise is a cooling effect. This is the tone of dispassion. Then we associate with others, not through outward appearance but through the heart, and our perspective opens accordingly.

All these recollections, if lingered on with mindfulness, will evoke a steadying tone. This tone affects the body's nervous energies; we feel stable, cool and open to a degree that exceeds a purely emotional effect. Such heart-opening qualities, if you give them deep attention and linger on them with mindfulness, lead into a place of stillness. Furthermore, even when the heart gets shaken with fear or grief or other forms of suffering, the *puñña* of repeated recollection is that its embodied effect can still be accessed. Then the reactive *saṇkhāra* that would otherwise rush out as 'I'm this, it's not fair, I can't stand it' (and so on) doesn't arise, or having arisen, ceases quickly. It also leads into the place of stillness that is unoccupied, yet without boundaries – this is where intention and impulse come to rest and kamma ends.

It's Always Possible

So whenever there is darkness in the heart, that's when you practise bright kamma and ending kamma. You don't have to figure out where the dissonance comes from and whose fault it is. All you need to know is that this is dark *vipāka* – and where it gets cleared. The process is like cleaning dirty laundry: it's done both by the action of placing the laundry in a basin and swishing it around, and without action because the water does the cleaning. So you take that dark residue and put it into the clarity or purity that skilful attention brings into play, and the dirt will begin to clear. We establish mindfulness, and deep attention lets go of what comes up. Whenever some of the dark residues get cleared, full knowing senses the lightness, or brightness. And you can tune in to that. This makes your *citta* broader, deeper and clearer. Over time there develops a ground of well-being, a gathering of *puñña*, that you can abide in. Through years of practice, your basin becomes a lake. But because with full knowing there isn't the sense that 'I've done this' or 'This means I'm this,' the mind remains quiet and receptive.

Our practice then is led by Dhamma rather than driven by self-view; and it inclines towards stopping the old rather than becoming something new. It's a cultivation that frees up, protects and gathers us into a free space at the centre of the heart. Bright kamma supports the kamma that leads to the end of kamma; it gives us a foretaste of that freedom.

* ‘Ajahn Nonti’, formally addressed as Professor Nonthivathn Chandhanaphalin, was the former dean of Silpakorn University in Bangkok. He subsequently died from cancer and heart failure on 22 January 2017 in Chonburi, Thailand, at the age of 70.

** As, for example, in S.48:10.

13 The two forms of contact are expounded in D.15:20.

14 As in M.18:18: ‘When there is no eye, no form, and no eye-consciousness, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of contact. When there is no manifestation of contact, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of feeling. When there is no … feeling, it is impossible to point out … perception … no … perception, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of thinking … no thinking, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of being beset by perceptions and notions tinged with mental proliferation.’

15 A.6:63 (see frontispiece/opening quote).

16 ‘Bhikkhus, whatever a bhikkhu frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind.’ M.19:11

17 ‘I do not see even a single thing that so causes unarisen unwholesome states to arise and arisen wholesome states to decline as [shallow]/careless attention ...

‘I do not see even a single thing that so causes unarisen wholesome states to arise and arisen unwholesome states to decline as [deep]/careful
attention ...’ A.1:66-67

18 ‘And what are things fit for attention that he attends to? They are things such that when he attends to them the unarisen [outflow]/taint of sensual desire does not arise and the arisen [outflow]/taint of sensual desire is abandoned, the unarisen [outflow]/taint of becoming does not arise … and the arisen … is abandoned, the unarisen [outflow]/taint of ignorance does not arise … and the arisen is abandoned.’ M.2:10

Meditation

Recollection

Sit in a comfortable and upright position, one that allows your body to be free from tension and fidgeting while encouraging you to be attentive. Let your eyes close or half-close. Bring your mental awareness to bear on your body, feeling its weight, pressures, pulses and rhythms. Bring up the suggestion of settling in to where you are right now, and put aside other concerns for the time being.

Take a few long, slow out-breaths sensing your breath flowing out into the space around you; let the in-breath begin by itself. Sense how the in-breath draws in from the space around you. Attune to the rhythm of that process, and interrupt any distracting thoughts by re-establishing your attention on each out-breath.

Bring to mind any instances of people's actions that have touched you in a positive way in terms of kindness, or patience, or understanding. Repeatedly touch the heart with a few specific instances, dwelling on the impression and the mood that it evokes. You might extend this recollection to include uplifting moments or interactions from the past, or by bringing to mind teachers who have inspired you.

Stay with the most deeply-felt recollection for a minute or two, with a sense of curiosity: 'How does this affect me?' Sense any effect in terms of heart: there may be a quality of uplift, or of calming, or of firmness. You may even detect a shift in your overall body tone. Allow yourself all the time in the world to be here with no particular purpose other than to feel how this recollection affects you in a sympathetic listening way.

Settle into that mood, and focus particularly on its tone – which may be of brightness or of stability or of uplift. Put aside analytical thought. Let any images come to mind and pass through. Dwell upon and expand awareness of the sense of vitality or stillness, of comfort or stability.

Then notice what inclinations and attitudes seem natural and important when you are dwelling in your place of value. Then bring those to your daily-life situation by asking: ‘What is important to me now?’ ‘What matters most?’ Then give yourself time to let the priorities of action establish themselves in accordance with that.

3
The Kamma of Meditation

Resetting the Mind

Wisdom springs from training the mind;
without such training, wisdom declines.
Having understood these paths –
of progress and decline –
one should conduct oneself so that wisdom grows.

Dhammapada: 'The Path', 282

The Buddhist Path proceeds according to the principles of training the mind in three complementary modes: ethics (*sīla*), meditation (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*). All these have active aspects, but what they lead to is a quietening and ceasing of mental activity. Meditation (*samādhi-bhavanā*) is the hinge between action and this restful alertness. It doesn't *look* active: it often centres on sitting still, and within that, in silence. And as for doing anything ... all it apparently entails are a few seemingly inconsequential things like walking to and fro, bringing attention to the sensations associated with breathing, or witnessing thoughts. But such actions bring around an engaged and responsive state. Furthermore, although the question might arise as to how doing this is supposed to improve one's mind, one point about meditation is that it's about moderating that very 'doing' energy. That can bring around very positive changes.

Towards this end, meditation practice uses the mind's thinking in a particular way – not to think *about* experience, but to use thought to place attention onto your own body and mind and sustain receptivity to what is noticed. This brings around a positive change because the more we moderate our minds in this way, the more we steady and attune them – so that restlessness, worry and negativity either don't arise or are witnessed and let go of. This process can generate far-reaching effects in our life: we get to enjoy and value

stillness and simplicity, we don't get caught by emotional upheaval, and we know how to let things pass. The result is calm, confidence and clarity.

Interconnection of Body, Thought and Heart

There are two processes that steer the kamma of meditation. The first process is one of strengthening and healing the heart through calming (*samatha*). *Samatha* practices use a steadying focus and a soothing attitude. The second process is 'insight' (*vipassanā*) – which is about seeing how things really are. The two processes work together: as you get settled and at ease, your attention gets clearer, and as you see things more clearly, liberating wisdom arises.[19] In this way, calm and insight guide the mind to an alert, knowing stillness.

To enter a period of meditation, you put aside personal issues and circumstances in order to attend to the basis of your body-mind system. With even a cursory review, it's clear how dynamic this system is: the body's sensations throb and change, and its energies tingle and flow. Meanwhile, the mental domain has its own dynamic: moods swing, thoughts race and spark off memories; then there are plans and decisions and all kinds of options popping up – it can be such a flood that we're often not completely with what we're doing right now. So the first step in meditation is to refrain from jumping into that flood, and instead familiarize yourself with how it happens. Then you're doing one unusual but important thing – establishing a way of witnessing, and therefore learning about, your conscious system.

Notice that you get messages from three aspects of this system: bodily intelligence gives you a sense of being here; emotional intelligence is meanwhile telling you how you are while the rational faculty is suggesting what you should do about this – and many other things. All very lively; these three intelligences run on energy. And they interact: the energies of moods and thoughts trigger resonances in the body's nervous system, and vice versa. Sometimes a burst of irritation or fear will cause a contraction in this somatic domain; or the notion of having lots of things to do generates an emotional spin in which you lose awareness of your body.

What you might not notice at first is that the three intelligences affect each other – so check that out for a while. If your mind is racing, is it possible to have a calm, aware bodily sense? Can you feel bright and assured if your body is slumped or tense? This interconnectedness is important in meditation, in which we use a steady, upright body to calm the mind. And calm gives rise to wisdom: you realize that although the sum total of this body-thought-heart interplay seems to be 'me', you can witness that 'me' – and the witnessing is equally 'mine', but it's a lot steadier and more spacious. It isn't coloured by the urgencies, discomforts and glitches of the personal world, and by referring to it, you lessen the spin of that world.

The personal world is kamma: old habits and concerns and reactions that get added to by fresh actions and responses. The mind is busy being, or creating, 'me'. The dynamic that keeps recycling kamma is carried out by programs – coded instructions that we associate with computer software – which in this case are organic. The capacity to form concepts and articulate them is the 'verbal program' (*vaci-saṇkhāra*). The heart's nature to be affected by feelings and impressions, and to formulate impulses and responses, is another program – *citta-saṇkhāra*. The body (*kāya*) also operates according to its program, which most crucially is geared to generating and circulating energy around breathing in and out. This program is called '*kāya-saṇkhāra*'.[20] All these programs are established by another one: the life-force (*āyusaṇkhāra*).

On these universal foundations, more personal programs get built. That is: the ability to conceive and articulate is adjusted to operate in terms of specific languages, attitudes and ways of thinking. Our emotional program of liking and disliking also gets fine-tuned to a range of individual-specific responses. As these programs get fixed and made familiar, they become 'mine' and then 'me'. 'I am a Swedish woman', 'I am a rational humanist', etc. This is the 'self-construction program' (*ahaṃkāra*); it collects these subjective attributes, inclinations and psychological patterns; that collection becomes 'me' and 'mine' – and that becomes the basis for ctions and speech.

These inclinations and programs are active *saṇkhārā* – in which

intention, the urge to do, gets the process going; and they result in baseline *saṇkhārā*, that is, the patterns of thinking, emotional response, and bodily energy that form the baseline for each individual's fresh kamma. Hence *saṇkhārā* are also referred to as 'formations' or 'kamma-formations'. The pattern of acquired attitudes, energies and behaviours becomes the old 'me'; and that becomes the basis for further action.

But with regard to that 'me', as you witness it, its seeming substantiality is created by the interweaving of thought and emotion with nervous energy backing it up – just as the spinning blades of a fan create the appearance of a solid disk. As to why this feels so 'me' and 'mine': it's the familiarity and specific form of these interplays that give rise to that. The person-specific nature of that form is old kamma; the interplay is new kamma. But do we have to keep chewing over and being chewed by kamma, and creating a spinning self out of it? Or is there something better to be?

Well, the aim of meditation, in fact of all Dhamma practice, is to get free from defective programs and even from encoding new ones – that's the program of meditation! As the paradox suggests, practice entails using the mind in particular ways to counteract negative programs, generate more skilful ones, and not have to create a self out of any of it. To this end, *samatha* works on the energy of *saṇkhārā* so that we can still the activity of our habitual programs; then their biases and distortions can be witnessed and cleared through insight. Working together, these meditative processes bring mind and heart to rest.

The Work of Not-Working

Let's get on with the practice. Since how you attend as well as what you attend to affect the heart – and that's where our self-impression (and its kamma) arises – it's important to begin right there. Recollections of the Triple Gem, and of one's ethical standards and good kamma, steadily applied, dispel worry and distraction and encourage the heart, so that you approach your experience in a peaceful but decisive way.[21]

For this, you have to exercise authority over thinking. Because the mind is geared to this verbal activity, it easily picks up and follows trains of thought that take you away from your bodily presence, and from a cool place where they could be witnessed. So one of the skills of meditation is to lightly apply thoughtful attention – without thinking of anything. It's as if you're about to think, and then, feeling the energy of your thinking, you steady it so that you can use it to lightly label an experience. Walking, you simply notice 'walking'; breathing, you notice 'this is breathing in … this is breathing out.' Then, as you place your attention on these simple themes, you're receptive, as in: 'How is this?'

Any kind of thinking operates through this two-fold process. Firstly, the rational mind scans for a sensory impression or a heart-impression and names it: 'cow', 'bell'. This is 'bringing to mind' or 'placing thoughtfulness', *vitakka*. In tandem with that, there is a momentary review to check out if the concept really fits, or to evaluate what attention has been placed on, as in: 'the cow is speckled, and seems agitated.' This evaluation is the more receptive aspect of thinking, *vicāra*. Evaluation connects to the *citta* by listening deeply. In meditation, you use it to listen out for the felt sense of bodily experience, such as 'this sensation feels sharp' or 'this breath feels long and fades gently.' These felt senses aren't simply feeling (= pleasant or painful), nor are they full-blown meanings – such as 'I'm being stabbed' or 'my body is dissolving.' Many felt senses are quite neutral and don't evoke much, but they provide an ongoing reference to direct experience – and that is grounding. As with the body: 'Right now my body is just a sense of warmth, of solidity and rhythmic energies.' That's a lot less stressful than 'I look a mess. I'm too fat.' So, in meditation, you use the simple felt senses of groundedness, spaciousness and natural rhythm to elicit the felt meaning 'I am really *here*, there is no pressure around me, I feel safe.' Just to be able to let a breath go all the way out, and have the time to wait and let the inhalation come in at its own rate and fill you, can give you an assurance that isn't always there in social contact. When your heart gets that, you can think, speak and act from that safe and fully present place.

So as you bring your heart and thought into line, turn them to whatever is the most stable pattern of physical sensations that occur

as your body is sitting still: the pressure of your body against what it's sitting on, the sense of the upright posture, etc. Learn to steady the body in the sitting position, and to set the body upright and relax what muscles aren't needed (such as in the face or hands). That means applying thought and heart to find out how best to sit in order to maintain alertness without stress. It can take some time to find an even balance because of habitual bad posture or residual tension in the body.

Also practise finding that balance when you are standing and walking. Keep referring to two bases: the spine, and the space around it. So try to sit, stand or walk in a way that brings the whole spine into alignment, from the top of the head to the tail, as if you were hanging upside down. Aim for a balance whereby the skeletal structure is carrying the majority of the weight, rather than the muscles: that lessens stress. Secondly, let your body sense the openness around it. This helps to get the front of the body to relax.

Stay alert to nervous energy. A high-pressure, fast-paced lifestyle can turn the entire nervous system into a mass of jangling wires. These energy patterns can shift from relaxed to tense, or receptive to aroused with one sight, sound or thought. And it takes a lot longer to calm down than it does to get stirred up. This sensitive, impulsive and receptive experience of body is the area of *kāya-saṇkhāra*. Referring to the body as a system of energies helps you to be aware of how the body is affected, how to guard this sensitivity against being triggered, and how to then turn its energies to good use. Because, if it is steadied, embodied energy can be strengthening and bright.

So if you get agitated or feel uncomfortable, or get lost in thought, keep coming back to these two reference points. The training is to keep your thinking minimal. This channels its energy and thereby brings around a more balanced state. This is necessary because although the verbal program is powered by an impulse to define and plan, it acquires distortions when out of anxiety we get lost in planning. So thinking can carry an emotional bias, and can hastily prejudge an experience – 'seeing' the cow as threatening because we are nervous around cows.

Virtue Leads to Release

‘Bhikkhus, for a virtuous person, one whose behavior is virtuous, no volition [cetanā] need be exerted: “Let non-regret arise in me.” It is natural that non-regret arises in a virtuous person, one whose behavior is virtuous.

‘For one without regret no volition need be exerted: “Let joy arise in me.” It is natural that joy arises in one without regret.

‘For one who is joyful no volition need be exerted: “Let rapture arise in me.” It is natural that rapture arises in one who is joyful.

‘For one with a rapturous mind no volition need be exerted: “Let my body be tranquil.” It is natural that the body of one with a rapturous mind is tranquil.

‘For one tranquil in body no volition need be exerted: “Let me feel pleasure.” It is natural that one tranquil in body feels pleasure.

‘For one feeling pleasure no volition need be exerted: “Let my mind be concentrated.” It is natural that the mind of one feeling pleasure is concentrated.

‘For one who is concentrated no volition need be exerted: “Let me know and see things as they really are.” It is natural that one who is concentrated knows and sees things as they really are.

‘For one who knows and sees things as they really are no volition need be exerted: “Let me be disenchanted and dispassionate.” It is natural that one who knows and sees things as they really are is disenchanted and dispassionate.

‘For one who is disenchanted and dispassionate no volition need be exerted: “Let me realize the knowledge and vision of liberation.” It is natural that one who is disenchanted and dispassionate realizes the knowledge and vision of liberation.’

(A.10:2; B. Bodhi, trans.)

Another major distortion is the assumption that thinking will make our lives happy and solid – that pre-judgement sets up all kinds of stress. We might, for example, become an incessant thinker, or someone who delights in thinking and enjoys generating ideas. Of course, some ideas are interesting, and it's great to link up a remembered fact with an imaginative proposal and start nudging them towards a conclusion. And yet this inner speech can be so absorbing that we don't see or think beyond the range of what we already know or have an attitude around; so we get tunnel vision, become obsessive and lose that open awareness within which one's ideas can be held in a broader perspective, other people's angles and sensitivities listened to, and the energy of thinking can be peacefully relaxed. In fact, if the energies of conceiving and evaluating, planning and speculating can't be moderated or discharged, the system burns out with nervous stress.[22]

However, thinking about how to stop thinking only adds more energy and conflict to the mix. This is why meditative training directs thinking. You skim off what's unskilful or unnecessary to consider right now, then steer your thoughtfulness towards the grounded presence of the body, taking in how it feels.

In this way, you steady the body, and through focusing on calm, repetitive experiences such as walking at a moderate pace, or breathing in a full and relaxed way from the abdomen, allow the *citta* to relax and open. Spreading attention slowly over the body as if in a slow massage is another good approach, one that adopts *citta's* response to pleasure. You also can do this while standing, using the sense of balance to steady the mind. Take the time to notice the feeling of space around your body; then sit, walk or stand feeling that space, doing nothing more than being present with the embodied system. Deepen into simple moment-by-moment attitudes of well-wishing: 'May I be well' … 'May others be well.'

I suggest this approach because attitude affects intention, which is the leader in the programming process. For many people, the energy of intention is set to the hyperactive mode of the business model: 'You've got to work hard. Get out there and make it work for you.' But if your heart is passionate or forceful, then your body

gets signals to give you more energy, so your nervous system gets overstimulated and you tense up. Just notice how much nervous energy you can expend in getting emotionally worked up about things; notice how draining that can be. So in meditation, train yourself to find a balance of resolve and receptivity rather than sustain ideals or imperatives that you can't back up through the body's energy or are beyond your psychological capacity. 'Sitting here until I realize complete enlightenment' is more likely to rupture your knee ligaments and stir up psychological turmoil than achieve the desired result.

A downshift in terms of speed and goals is a major shift. But you can begin by adjusting your attitude to one that makes the mind workable, fluid and curious. You move from 'I've got to get it right' to 'How is this? Let's take things a moment at a time.' With this, you steady your energy, and use attitudes and intentions that bring your heart into play – so that it will be a supportive participant in this interconnected process.

This meditative kamma can then tone up the basis of all your intelligences; this brings around bodily ease, interrupts compulsive or habitual thinking, and also enables you to exercise authority over what you think about and how. And as this is about resetting your own conscious system, you can take the practice and its results with you wherever you go.

Consolidation Through Breathing

Once you've established a good foundation for meditation, you can pay attention to breathing in and breathing out. To be clear and attentive to breathing through the period of one whole inhalation and one whole exhalation and on to the next in a sustained way, reveals and unravels compulsive mind-states. Thus freed, the *citta's* full potential can be realized; this is a powerful practice.

You can enter this practice by using a mantra such as 'Buddho', thinking 'Bud-' as you breathe in, so that the syllable extends over the entirety of that bodily process. Then do the same with '-dho' on the out-breath. You can also initiate evaluation by adding the questions: 'How do I know I am breathing?' And then: 'How is

that?' Use just enough to keep the mind engaged; you don't need a lot of thinking – you just need to engage its receptive aspect. You may then notice that the direct experience of breathing arises as a sense of swelling, tightening and subsiding in the upper body as a whole. And sense it as a rhythmic flow of sensations and flushes. Of these, the most obvious aspects are the purely physical ones – for example, the repeated swelling of the chest or the abdomen, and the tightening and relaxing of the skin. More refined than these is the flow of air through the nose and down the back of the throat. And there's also the subtle energetic effect: as you breathe in, you get a brightening effect, and as you breathe out, you get a quiet, calming effect. These are three strata of breath experience. Given time, you can discern them all.

The energetic effect is even discernible in non-breathing parts such as the face, hands and even the legs. This energy is intelligent. It seems to know what to do; so you can relax. If the mind doesn't interfere, breathing settles and calms by itself. Even when you're asleep or distracted, this intelligent system takes care of itself. And if you can connect your mind and heart to it, this involuntary flow of brightening and soothing energy brightens and calms the *citta*.

Don't force a tight focus. The Buddha doesn't mention focusing on one point in the body, or even on the breath; rather, he speaks more in terms of being receptive to the *kāya-saṇkhāra*, the overall process of breathing. The discourse on mindfulness of breathing simply instructs: '*Know you're breathing in, and know you're breathing out.*'[23] So the recommendation is just to be aware of the 'in-out', the rhythm. To me that's significant, because rhythm has a heart effect. Every musician, every parent rocking a baby, knows that. If focusing feels tense, try receiving the rhythm – say the slight swell in the chest, or even the belt around your waist tightening and loosening; it should be something that keeps coming back so it is easily noted. So be aware of the body as a pattern of repeated sensations that occur with the breathing. When you pick up the repetitive quality, you'll discern the energy, because that's the source of that flowing vitality.

The training is to get simple. Give yourself whatever time you need to simplify – this alone reverses the trends of a lifetime. And when

you lose focus, don't make a problem out of it. That could turn another *citta* habit around. So just notice when you've drifted off, and at that point ask: 'What's happening with breathing right now?' Then pick up whatever sensation comes to the fore connected with breathing. That makes the practice accessible. You're probably shifting ingrained programs just by not pushing. Then, as you get lighter and simpler, the rest of the practice follows.

As your mind tunes in, you can refine the process by attuning to the full length of the breath. This gets you in touch with the ending of an out-breath, with its release and stillness; and with the complete fullness and stillness at the completion of an inhalation. This steady moving in and out of stillness is an aspect of bodily energy that we often miss out on in our normal way of life. But giving yourself the time to attune to the breathing allows you to be with that movement. And as you train '*thoroughly sensitive to the entire body, breathing in ... breathing out*', you attune to the body's energies as they brighten, refresh and relax. This represents an important shift of attention from the rational or visual bases that normally dominate our lives. The sense-base of the body is highly sensitive and responsive: when I touch something, it touches me. So when that contact is easeful, there is a sense of trust. And when one trusts, the energy relaxes, and the heart brightens. Hence, being in touch with breathing brings sensitivity and relaxation: bright kamma.

This gives rise to somatic and emotional effects: one feels deeply relaxed and refreshed. This is the experience of rapture (*pīti*), a buoyant and refreshed state, and ease (*sukha*). Rapture and ease carry the sense of being in the flow with something. It's not just that one is doing good, but that good things are happening. As we pick up the sense of that, the *citta* and the body become calm and the breathing gets softer, and the combined effects permeate the entire system. The thinking mind, the heart, and the body come together, and their unification is both bright and calm. That's *samādhi*, or 'right concentration'.

Samādhi is richer than the concentration that we might develop for solving problems, or when being absorbed in entertainment. These pursuits work by flooding rather than training attention: you don't

develop much skill in sensitizing and handling your programs when you're watching the World Cup! *Samādhi* is a conscious consolidation of bodily, conceptual and heart energy, brought around by applying the mind, and keeping the entire conscious system alert, sensitive and contained. The right kind of consolidation depends on modifying intention and attention: you have to learn how to encourage interest, how to appreciate, how to let go, and how to enjoy. Learning these skills alone is a good enough reason to practise.

To recap: with bringing to mind and evaluation, one both primes and guides the attention with appropriate prompts. Ordinary discursive thinking generally makes the body feel more hard-edged or agitated, notably in the hands or the face (the 'do-it' parts of the body), or in the diaphragm (the 'brace yourself' area of the body). If these occur, ask: 'How is my entire body now?' to release the grip; then, when things feel balanced: 'Where is the breathing now? What if I wait for the next out-breath, and just let that flow through the whole body?' Letting the breathing happen by itself takes time and skill.

In the case of repetitive, obsessive thoughts, you might relate the thinking to the heart: there might be a sense of hurt beneath the complaining of the thoughts; or a giddy whirl that's connected to a great idea. The unpleasant or pleasant feeling has to be attuned to, met, and opened around. Then: 'Can I be with this feeling?' So you stop fighting it or believing in it. Rather than analyse and scold yourself for wandering off again ('how many times ...!' etc.) – just pause. You might benefit from a sympathetic inner voice: 'How am I? May I be well ...' If the thoughtfulness is simple and caring, it can bear with and perhaps discharge the push of the feeling. Or you might ask: 'Am I settled in terms of my body?' And, as you feel the whole body settle down, at some time ask: 'Why not flow with the breathing for now?' It takes responsive clarity to bring the mind out of hankering and criticising, or being blanketed by drowsiness, worry or doubt.

As attention is steered into an unhindered source of energy, the heart can linger and enjoy. There can be a radiant, uplifting effect as the breath-energy permeates the entire body. The hard edges and

stiffness of the body dissolve and the body is sensed more as an energetic field. Ease then stabilizes attention within that to counteract any giddiness or apprehension. When this develops as an enduring effect, it gives rise to the state of absorption (*jhāna*).

Ending Kamma Through Insight

Samādhi is generated through skilful intentions in the present. It also relies upon already having a mind-set that settles easily, and it naturally sets up programs for the future: one inclines to simpler, and more peaceful ways of living. *Samādhi* provides us with a temporary liberation from some kammic themes – such as sense-desire, ill-will, worry, or despond – and it gives us a firm, grounded mind which feels bright. But *samādhi* itself is still bound up in time and cause and effect; it is kamma, bright and refined, but still formulated.

Also, it takes time to develop *samādhi*. And meanwhile, the very notion of 'getting *samādhi*' can trigger stressful formulations such as: 'Got to get there', 'Can't do it' and so on. Accordingly, the learning point for both one who does, and

for one who doesn't, develop much *samādhi*, is to handle and review the programming. 'How much craving is in this? How much "me holding on" is there?' That's the process of insight. It's always relevant.

The results of holding on can be discerned in our most obvious and continual form of kamma: thinking. Thinking plays a big part in our lives, governing how we relate to circumstances and other people, determining what potentials we want to bring forth and where interesting opportunities might lie – and just reflecting, musing and daydreaming. So moderating and contemplating thought is an all-day practice. This practice offers understanding – and therefore a means of purifying one's kamma, and even getting beyond it.

To do this, notice the tone or speed or raggedness that thinking has. By doing this, there is a disengagement from the topic or purpose of thinking; and your mind settles and connects to how the thought feels in the heart. When your heart is grounded in the body, you

don't get captured by the drive or emotional underpinning of thinking. Whether you have a great idea, or are eager to get your idea acted upon, or you don't have a clue and feel ashamed of that – all that can be sensed and allowed to change into something more balanced. So this hinges on referring to the interconnected system of body, thought and heart. Ideally we want to direct our lives with the full set, so that we're not just acting on whims and reactions, and our thoughts and ideas are supported by good and steady heart. That heart is where kamma arises, so you want to make sure it's in good shape and is on board with what you're proposing. Get it grounded in the body before you let the tide of thought rush in.

Once you settle the heart, you can evaluate the current of thought in terms of its effect. Sometimes it feels really pleasant in itself (like when people agree with me), but when I refer to how it sits in my heart and body, thinking can seem overdramatic, self-important, petty or unbalanced. Too often thinking closes the opportunity for the miraculous to occur, or for a fresh point of view to arise. And as the after-effect of all kamma is that a self-image gets created, do my thoughts make me into a fault-finder; a compulsive do-er; a habitual procrastinator; a feverish complicator; or a slightly grandiose attention-seeker? Does thinking keep my heart very busy being 'me', or could it be just a balanced response to what a situation needs – something that can dissolve without trace?

And as self-images do arise, can they be evaluated and witnessed with steady awareness? Can openness and goodwill arise in that awareness to know: 'this is an image, this is old kamma, don't act on this but let it pass'? In this way, we can avoid making assumptions, established attitudes, and directed intentions into fixed identities. These are the blades of the spinning fan – stored up as *citta-saṇkhārā*. If you train in *samādhi* and *paññā*, those self-programs can be unplugged. True actions don't need an actor.

What underpins the automatic plugging-in is ignorance, the programming that is most fundamental to our suffering and stress. Ignorance is easy: pre-fabricated attitudes cut out the awkward process of being with things afresh. Ignorance gets seeded in the familiar and blossoms into the compulsive – which feels really solid and 'me'. That's how it is. But as the sense of self centres around

people's most compulsive behaviour, the personal self is so often experienced as the victim of habit, a being who's locked into patterns and programs.

This is why it's always remedial to attend to the kinds of kamma that are about not doing. The not-doing of harm, for example, is an absolutely vital intention to carry out – if enough of us followed this, it would change the world. And what about the other precepts? We can fulfil these day after day, and not notice it because our hearts and minds were elsewhere, believing we should do more and not noticing the not-doing mind. But the crucial Dhamma actions are just this: to disengage from the compulsive, and mindfully engage with the steady openness of your own interconnected intelligence.

For example, when a verbal exchange is getting overheated, you can attune to what's happening in the body – the palms of the hands, the temples and the eyes are accessible indicators of energy. Does this energy need to be more carefully held? Sometimes I find that just acknowledging and adjusting the speed of speaking or walking shifts attitudes and moods; softening the gaze is also helpful. Say you're feeling dull or depressed: is your body fully present …? Giving some attention there with a kindly attitude helps the energy to brighten up, and shifts the mind-state.

Holding on, gaining, succeeding, losing: the programs that *saṇkhārā* concoct – deliberate or instinctive, driving or drifting – can be witnessed. We can notice the surge of glee or despond, the lure of achievement, and the itch to get more. But we can focus on these impressions, heart-patterns and programs just as they are, rather than believing 'this is me'; 'this is mine'; 'I take my stand on this'; or even 'I am different from all this stuff.' This is the focus of insight. It's about witnessing programs: how they depend on self-views, how they arise based on feeling, attract a grasping, lead to the creation of ideas and notions, create a self – and so keep *saṃsāra* rolling on. With insight, you contemplate the rigmarole of success and failure, of what I am and what I will be: it's all more kamma, more self-view, more stuff to get busy with. But if you see the endlessness of all that, you work with the self-patterning and cut off stressful programs. And that's the only way to get free of kamma.

When that point becomes clear, deepening liberation depends on staying attentive and learning from what arises and passes through your awareness. Because when one relates to bodily, conceptual and emotional energies as programs, that doesn't support the view 'I am'. Being unsupported by that view, the basis of feeling is exposed; with disengagement and dispassion, that feeling doesn't catch hold. But it's like scratching an itch, or smoking a cigarette: even though you get the idea that it might be good to stop, your system won't do it unless it gets an agreeable feel for the benefits of stopping, and you develop the resolve and the skills to do so.

To this end, ethics place discernment where it most often needs to dwell; meditation blends body, thought and heart together into firmness, clarity and ease; and wise insight disbands the defective programs. Then we can handle life without getting thrown up and down by it. We don't have to keep on proving ourselves, defending ourselves, creating ourselves as obligated, hopeless, misunderstood and so on. Kamma, and a heap of suffering, can cease.

19 'These two things – serenity (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) – occur in him yoked evenly together.' M.149:10. See also A.4:170.

"When tranquillity (*samatha*) is developed, what purpose does it serve? The mind is developed. And when the mind is developed, what purpose does it serve? Passion is abandoned.

'When insight (*vipassanā*) is developed, what purpose does it serve? Discernment is developed. And when discernment is developed, what purpose does it serve? Ignorance is abandoned.' A.2:30 (Thanissaro, trans.)

20 Three kinds of *saṇkhārā*: 'There are the three formations ...: the bodily formation, the verbal formation and the mental formation ...' 'In-breathing and out-breathing ... are the bodily formation; applied thought and sustained thought are the verbal formation; perception and feeling are the mental formation.' M.44:13-15

21 A.11:11-12 gives examples of how recollecting the themes of the Triple Gem and one's virtues and generosity are supportive factors for stream-entry, the first level of awakening.

22 But with excessive thinking and pondering, I might tire the body, and when the body is tired, the mind becomes strained, and when the mind is strained, it is far from

concentration.' M.19:8

23 The italicised statement in the next paragraph is from the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, M.118:18.

Here the word 'understand' (*pajānati*) is close to the word '*sampajāno*' (full knowing) and implies a direct awareness of the experience, rather than thinking about it.

Meditation

Embodying the Mind

Sit in an upright posture, and bring awareness to the present-moment experience of the body. Ask yourself, 'How do I know I have a body?' In other words, seek the direct experience of embodiment – the pressures, energies, pulses and vitality that signify awareness of the body. Then from that place of direct sensitivity, look for more details.

Push down a little through your tail and pelvic floor. Notice how that helps to shift the spinal column into a balance where the sacrum is straightened and the lumbar region of the back forms a springy arch. Avoid locking or straining. Use a slight downward push to form the arch, rather than force an exaggerated bow. Then sustain that posture by lengthening your abdominal muscles so that the rib cage is supported. This posture allows the body to be carried by a spring that transfers its weight down to what you're sitting on.

Move your awareness gradually and sensitively up your spine from the tail tip through the sacrum, and the lumbar and thoracic vertebrae. Widening your focus, get a sense of the entire torso extending upwards along the spine from the pelvic region. Check out the centre of the back, between the lower tips of the shoulder blades: bring this place alive by slightly drawing it inwards towards the heart. Moving upwards, make sure that the shoulders are dropped and relaxed, and sweep a relaxing awareness from the base of the skull down to the sides of the neck and across the tops of the shoulders. Bring awareness to the neck vertebrae – notice that there is a sense of space between the back of the skull and the top of the neck. For this, it may help if you tuck your chin in and tilt it down just a little. Check the overall balance – that the head feels balanced on the spine, directly above the pelvis. Check that the spine feels uncramped; relax the shoulders, the jaw, and let the chest be open. Spend some time feeling into the skeletal structure, with the suggestion that the joints – those between the arms and the shoulders, for example – loosen and feel open. Let the arms be long. Relax into balance. Sense the spaciousness that this allows you; stay

spacious and avoid a close-up or intense scrutiny.

Attend to the bodily sensations in bodily terms: for example, how the weight of the body feels distributed; or the degree of vitality and inner warmth that is present. Feel for the subtle movements in the body even when it is still – pulses, suffusions, and the rhythmic sensations associated with breathing in and out. Get comfortable: evaluate the bodily impressions in terms of ease. A certain pressure in one place may feel solid and grounding, while in another, tight or stiff. The energies and inner sensations moving through your body may feel agitated, or vibrant. Put aside any interpretations as to what causes these, or any immediate reactions to make things change. Instead, spread awareness evenly over the entire body, with an intent of harmony and steadiness. Let that attitude be felt as an energy spread over the body. This will allow any tightness to relax, and bring brightness to slack or dull areas.

As things come into harmony, the sensations of the breathing will become more apparent, deep and steady. You may find that not only does the breathing flow down into the abdomen, but it also sets up a subtle flush or tingle that can be felt in the face, the palms, and chest. Dwell in that and explore how it feels. It's likely that the mind will wander, but make sure, above all, that you stay with the intent of harmony and steadiness. So, when you notice that your mind has drifted, at that moment of realization – pause. Don't react. As the mind hovers for that moment, introduce the query 'How do I know I'm breathing now?' Or, simply, 'Breathing?' Attune to whatever sense arises that tells you you're breathing, and follow the next out-breath, letting the mind rest on that out-breath. See if you can stay with that out-breath through its completion into the pause before the inbreath. Then follow the in-breath in like fashion, to the very last sensation. In this way, let the rhythm of the breathing lead the mind – rather than impose an idea of mindfulness onto the natural process of breathing.

Explore how you experience breathing in different parts of your body, beginning with the abdomen. 'How does the abdomen know breathing?' You may experience it as a 'fluid' swelling of sensation. Be with that for a few minutes, letting the mind take that in. Then, 'How does the solar plexus know breathing?' This may feel more

solid, an opening and closing. Then the chest, where swelling ‘airy’ sensations predominate. Check out the throat, and the centre of the brow above the bridge of the nose. Notice how the breathing is not one mode of sensations or energies, and yet in terms of energy, the distinction between in- and out-breathing is always recognizable.

Eventually your mind will want to settle. Let it choose how that feels most comfortable. It may settle in an area of the body, such as the chest or in the abdomen or nasal cavities. Or it may be that awareness can easily cover the body as a whole. In time as the mind merges into the breath-energy, spread its awareness over the entirety of the bodily sense, in the manner of suffusing or pervading. The distinct sensations of breathing may well diffuse and dissolve into that energy. Allow some trust, letting the thinking attention relax, and relying on the enjoyment of subtle energy to hold your awareness. Be present but not engaged with whatever arises.

When you wish to stop, draw your attention back to the textures of the flesh and the firmness of the skeletal structure. As you feel that grounded presence, allow your eyes to open without looking at anything in particular. Instead, let the light and forms take shape by themselves.

4
Kamma and Memory

Clearing the Past

One who was heedless in the past
and is heedless no more,
illuminates the world like the moon
freed from the clouds.

Dhammapada: 'The World', 172

Do you ever remember things you wish you hadn't done? Perhaps after making a cutting remark, or catching yourself exaggerating in order to get your own way, have the sinking realization: 'Oh-oh, lost it again ...!' Or, do you get flooded with painful memories about what's been done to you? ... 'Is this my bad kamma ...? How do I get out of this?'

Old Kamma Doesn't Die

At some time or another, all of us have said or done things that we look back on with some regret. Or we have not done things – not said the generous, friendly thing we wish we had said, not done the noble or caring deed that we wish we had done. Then again, we may have had unpleasant things done to us. Other people may have taken advantage of us or abused us; people we trusted let us down – so maybe some mistrust lingers and affects how we relate to people. In any case, if an event has emotionally moved us, the heart-impression is strong, and that impression arises again in the experience of involuntary memory. It's one feature of our inner world: you were talking to someone, the conversation took a few turns – and suddenly you were back arguing with your father, or feeling rejected by a loved one ... again.

This reliving of past events is the case even when we didn't do

anything, but were the recipients of other people's bad or good actions. Why? Because the underlying program of the affective mind, or *citta,* is to register contact, and based on that, designate a heart-impression. This lingers as a perception (*saññā*) that can store the emotion in the way that a barcode stores images or instructions.

Once formed, these perceptual patterns generate programs that keep forming and informing different scenarios based on their themes. It's as if the actors and backdrops change, but their voices and atmospheres can keep resounding in our hearts. Recycled by patterns and programs, stories about alienation, unworthiness or mistrust (and more) become so familiar that they form part of our heart-territory, aspects of 'myself'. Afflictive felt meanings such as these can take hold and establish personality patterns such as being the victim, or the one who gets left out, or the flawed, unloved or impure. They then lessen our self-respect and our confidence in doing things or in being with others.

So the past that comes flooding back isn't really past; it's those *saṇkhārā* rising up and recycling their perceptions. And yet there's a glimmer of hope in the fact that they're recycled, rather than permanent and 'myself'. The recycling of heart-impressions creates a sense of continuity, of history and of being someone defined in that – this is the program of 'becoming', or 'existence' (*bhava*). It creates us as solid, to a degree, but that isn't always good.

Nor is it true: nothing changes so quickly as *citta*.[24] This is because *citta,* rather than being some kind of soul or immaterial 'thing', is more like a vortex of sensitive intelligence, or an energetic field like that of a magnet – except that the field is dynamic. It's sensitive and receptive, and as *manas* brings perceptions, or as bodily sensations touch it, shifts happen: the *citta* is set trembling. Disagreeable and agreeable impressions push and pull it, thus the *citta's* trembling forms waves of resistance or excitement. These get rigid or brisk under the pressure of some perceptions and feelings, or reach out when touched by others. In many cases, the waveform rises up under stimulation ... and then subsides. But through the program of perception, the *citta* 'learns' the signals to rise up to, and the ones to recoil from.

Dependent on whether and how a perception has moved the *citta*,

we may cognize that a smile means 'friendly', and that the smiling person is trustworthy. Pleasant feeling = 'good'. Then we 're-cognize' those signs when we come across them or others like them – even when the basis of the meaning is superficial. Signals are not reality, and need to be checked out: we are prone to short-term attention, grabbing at feeling, and jumping to conclusions. Thus hastily established heart-impressions become reference points for how to act. Advertising, media propaganda and political slogans depend on establishing patterns in the heart. It's called 'ignorance-contact': imprinting stupidity.[25]

This is the crucial point; this is why *citta* doesn't erase or stop recycling patterns. Based upon this ignorance, the self-construction program kicks in: the pattern provides a stable reference point, so it becomes part of my world, and my identity. Hence toads disgust me, or I vote for the Liberal candidate, or I must have peanut-butter rolls and coffee to begin my day. Contact, heart-impression, then behaviour-pattern – and out of all that, a self is born with the potential to act accordingly: kamma.

In extreme cases, when the impact is severe (for example, in cases of war, or assault), the energy-field of *citta* shatters, fires off fight-flight-freeze reflexes, and thereby adds to the discord that has to subside. And, however one tries to pull oneself together, shrug and move on, the subsiding of the energetic pattern of 'shattered' only fully occurs as the *citta* witnesses that the initiating impact has been resolved. This may be the case when the threatening thing is met, responds, backs off, or changes into something non-threatening. Sometimes it even apologizes! But when the impact is a memory, there's no-one there to apologize, no signal that the attack has ended. In such instances, the *citta* has to be encouraged to coalesce around the impact and its responses until steadiness returns. Even if this means steadying in the presence of reverberations of fear or grief or rage, rather than suppressing them.

Needless to say, these emotions are not easy to be present with, and so the *citta* often shuts down. This means that the *citta* removes its intelligence, its witnessing, from that pattern. At that point, we stupefy; then the shock, fear or rage, etc. is no longer in aware presence and the experience becomes traumatic. In such a case, the

pattern still exists in a ghost form, ready to be brought alive when a fitting signal triggers it. And most likely, *citta* once again will shut down – generally by shifting its attention to another topic, sound, sight, taste ... you name it. Either that or it will set off a less-than-intelligent reaction: blame someone, blame yourself, drink, eat and so on. But you don't get over it. You either suppress it – or you resolve it.

Citta and Kāya: The Affected Field

The programmed, conditioned *citta* generates further programs and conditions; its formative energy (*citta-saṇkhāra*) runs into our bodies and drives emotions and thoughts. We can feel this programmed process occur in the flush of our skin, the tightening in the stomach, the opening of the chest, or the sinking in the heart. In the case of a bodily reflex, a somatic program/energy, or *kāya-saṇkhāra*, stimulates instinctive emotion; either that or it follows through on the heart's signals to trigger reactions – even in cases which don't pertain to the physical body. The body tightens up when we are in an argument; a loud noise may cause it to jump; a 'warm' smile triggers off a flutter in the pulse, and so on. The experiencing body (*kāya)* and heart are essentially not separate, and at an instinctive reflex level, the bodily intelligence will override the rational. This is important to bear in mind, because even when a memory, or the result of an action, is reasoned with and dismissed, forgotten, or suppressed ('Oh, never mind; that was years ago,' etc.), there can still be a bodily and emotive memory-pattern that arises at an unexpected time.

Consequently, in order to clear those effects, you have to meet them in aware embodied presence. The snag is that the *citta* uses bodily *saṇkhāra* in its shutting-down strategy; then pieces of that memory get buried under the body's armouring or numbing programs. So the 'voice' of their memories is silenced. And, as we're often dealing with or creating inner chatter, we don't feel and therefore don't know about these shut-down programs. However, we might notice that our body has areas of numbness and tension that aren't related to physical causes. Such conditions may indicate that the bodily intelligence has closed over some afflictive or traumatic residues. Another indicator is that one feels overwhelmed, or flattened, or

explosive in certain scenarios; problems seem huge, one loses perspective and lashes out, freezes or collapses. This is because when an area that has had intelligence removed from it suddenly opens, the readings and responses aren't intelligent. We do and say stupid, reckless things. Then we inherit the results of that – and become a self based on the cycle of blow-up, punish, suppress ... and then we repeat the program.

Any form of abuse – physical, verbal, or psychological (mine towards others, others' towards me, or mine towards myself) – closes down or perverts the heart's sensitivity. All that creates a pattern that encourages a program. Even unskilful thoughts have that effect; particularly as we can have them many times more than we can carry out physical deeds. If we allow the mind to repeatedly formulate deceit, jealousy, or guilt, that creates a track down which the emotional and psychological energies will run. If you swat annoying insects, or haul fish out of the water with a hook for sport, you may not think this is particularly evil. Indeed, we can do a lot worse.

But with any decisive action we generate a ripple in the *citta*; repeated, it becomes a pattern that energy flows into, and a *saṇkhāra* track – a potential for further action – gets established. With any act of harming or abusing, that ripple forms a wave that obliterates respect for life. If it isn't acknowledged and caused to subside, it can extend its disregard to legitimize killing 'bad' people, and any inconvenient others. Genocide was supported by the notion that the indigenous people were sub-human – so they could be treated in the same way that we've learned to treat animals. Especially if they were occupying land that we wanted. Sadly, it's also the case that the State demands that its citizens fight and kill others in a war – and thereby do violence to their own hearts. Who's fault is that?

'Ignorance' has to be the answer. Through this, what may have begun as your own impulse, or someone else's that you followed or reacted to, gets embedded – and creates a track in the *citta's* field. Then fresh physical or verbal actions move down that path. To use an analogy: a wild pig, alarmed or excited by something or another, darts through the undergrowth in a forest. It thereby creates a

track. Other pigs, and deer, see that track and walk down it. The track widens and becomes established. You're wandering through the forest, see the track, and, as it represents an easy way through the undergrowth, you also use it. The track becomes a path and eventually a road. Cars drive down it, so that even when the forest is cut down, there is no other way to travel. You're not familiar with the wider territory. Eventually, because the road is convenient, you build your house beside it.

That's how it is: the mind keeps running down *saṇkhāra* tracks that were established through a careless impulse, or by chance, or even by other people. People can still feel chronic guilt over the heedless actions of a decade ago. And we can also harbour grudges, or be running programs of self-disparagement and lack of worth over actions and attitudes that we've been the recipients of. Worse still: when it's bound up with a self-view, an identity gets built next to that track – that failed, evil self is 'who I am'. In such a case, when we do something, we feel that we're bound to get it wrong and look out for signs of disapproval. Or on reviewing an action, we decide that our motives were impure. In some cases, tracks get so habitual that the mind loses touch with any fresher possibilities. Who's fault is that?

Wrong question. Through ignorance, *saṇkhāra* tracks create a self as their source, when the source was really an embedded memory, *vipāka*. But on account of that pattern, programs arise: people sabotage their well-being with self-disparagement, anxiety or depression, and employ distracting habits to shut off those memories and resonances. This is a set-up for addiction. Drinking, drugs, pornography, gambling, over-eating, binge-shopping, internet addiction, incessant chatter and restless activity: there is a wide range of addictions, some more toxic than others, but all afflictive, and all contributing to the 'inadequate self' they originated from, and deepening that impression.

To sum up: the patterns and programs, good and bad, are the waveforms in the causal field of *citta*. They are the means through which the mind operates in order to establish how to function in this sensory and psychological world. Furthermore, they formulate a self-image as the holding pattern, the locus of stability. However

... as it's constructed out of dynamic energy patterns, such a locus can't be very stable. The best the average person can do is maintain a workable series of 'good-enough' patterns that keep the show on the road. And yet, as the *citta* keeps pulsing and turning, at times it encounters its unresolved patterns or shut-down territory – and the past rises up independently of one's wishes. Dependent on ignorance, and compounded by responses, impulses and intentions, the past event has laid down a pattern in the *citta*, and a sense of 'I am this' arises through its instinctive re-enactment.

The End of Grief: The Nun's Story

'Overwhelmed with grief for my son –
naked, demented,
my hair disheveled
my mind deranged –
I went about here & there,
living along the side of the road,
in cemeteries & heaps of trash,
for three full years,
afflicted with hunger & thirst.'

'Then I saw
the One Well-Gone,
gone to the city of Mithilā:
tamer of those untamed,
Self-Awakened,
with nothing to fear
from anything, anywhere.'

'Regaining my mind,
paying him homage,
I sat myself down.
He, Gotama, from sympathy
taught me the Dhamma.
Hearing his Dhamma,
I went forth into homelessness.
Applying myself to the Teacher's words,'

'I realized the state of auspicious bliss.
All griefs have been cut off,

abandoned,
brought to this end,
for I've comprehended
the grounds from which griefs
come into play.'

(Therīgathā 6:2; Thanissaro, trans.)

Unless we cultivate letting go, unless we can stop accepting heart-patterns as unbiased truth and 'my self', the issues of the past will be the basis for further kamma. The difficulty is that letting go requires the presence of an awareness that can receive these impressions, their tracks and residues. This takes a lot of grounded goodwill, clarity and spaciousness – qualities that can remind the *citta* of 'safe and comfortable'.

In life-scenarios of chronic abuse, or sustained performance-driven stress, the heart-pattern of 'safe and comfortable' may in fact be rare. So when we go to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha for Refuge, this isn't just a catch-phrase; it's a practice of sensing the felt meaning of the Triple Gem, attuning one's heart to it, and opening one's embodied presence to the quality of Refuge.[26] A true Refuge is that which remains when your world goes upside down; this is why people with great faith can survive disasters and tyrannies.

The felt meaning, the perception, of being in Refuge, may be evoked by attending to what is not urgent or threatening right now – even if that is just the space of an open sky. Even a visual sign such as this can evoke the tone of 'being safe in this', a tone that allows your body to breathe freely. However, the tone of Refuge can more skilfully occur through reflections on bright kamma, that of others or one's own. Its underlying theme is that you don't create it; it arrives by being receptive to a supportive pattern, whether that is a memory or a presence. A Refuge that we feel welcomed into can then provide the container wherein distressing memories can arise and pass, and thus assist in 'de-conditioning' the mind.

Clearing Results from the Past: An Outline

With regard to what we can do to clear our inner world, the process of clearing the past as outlined by the Buddha is twofold: first, to acknowledge the results of action, and to determine not to act in such ways again; and secondly, to spread inclinations of goodwill through the whole system and towards anyone else connected to the action.[27]

What needs to be cleared occurs on three levels: there are active programs – actions we keep doing; there are involuntary tendencies – patterns that lie dormant but come to the surface under stress, or as the mind unfolds in meditation; and finally there's the self-view – the aspect of self-construction that refers to how we habitually regard ourselves. In all cases, the method entails accessing the patterns and programs in the mind, and revealing their tracks with deep attention. And then being mindful of and fully sensing how these conditions manifest. Then we need to meet them skilfully so that a response arises from the intelligence that begins to return through not following the old track.

In brief, we establish and firm up a reference to a healthy pattern, and then expand awareness so that that bright quality receives, meets and smoothes out residues of fear, rage, self-hatred, grief – or whatever the *citta* hasn't been able to discharge. This may sound like a lot, but because many impulses and programs move along a few basic tracks, clearing the past is not a matter of focusing on every wild pig that's charged through the heart – it's more a case of straightening, uprooting, or leaving its tracks.

At the most obvious level, that of acknowledging actions and of changing how you're going to act in the future, you own up to any unskilful deed you feel you've done, and with deep attention, discern the underlying pattern. (Remember, it's a pattern, not a self.) Widen attention so that the *citta* can step back from that pattern. At the same time, stabilize the mind in the energetic feel of resolve, so that awareness is strengthened – then a resolution that's made will stick. In this way, you block off access and nourishment for that bad habit, and its track begins to fade.

Following on from that, the general theme of practice is to spread kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), appreciative joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*) into the *citta's* field. Collectively, they're

called ‘the measureless’ (*appamāno*) or a ‘celestial abiding’ (*brahmavihāra*). In more down-to-earth terms, accessing them means touching into the felt sense and tone of these empathetic qualities, then lingering in and strengthening the *citta* with them. When the heart feels full, it’s natural and easy to steadily extend its awareness towards beings you feel you may have affected – and towards your own heart if it has become infected in some way or another.

So: you recollect an unskilful deed you’ve done towards another, considering how you would feel if you were them – or towards the person you may have been at that time. And when you remember being the object of others’ abuse or lack of empathy, you do much the same. You take the impression of who you feel you’ve been, and who you feel the other has been, and suffuse the entirety with goodwill; or at least with non-aversion.

The practice covers both ourselves and others, because in the heart, ‘self and other’ are just forms that arise from *saññā-saṇkhāra*. They are also interdependent. That is, our personalities are established and moulded dependent on who we’ve customarily interacted with: such as parents, peers and colleagues. And it is through the eyes of our personality that we regard and define others. When the personality has an embedded mistrust or hostility pattern, it projects that onto others. Granted, many people can exhibit forceful or intimidating mannerisms, but when your buttons get pushed by a few words, or a glance, or even just by their status, then you know that you have stuff to clear – otherwise you’ll keep that track of inferred hostility open and well-trodden.

The process of clearing entails our capacity to suffuse (or ‘pervade’) the *citta* with healthy ripples and waves. This entails a soft and slow expansion of awareness through body and heart. It’s a meditative training based on the understanding that where awareness goes, energy goes; awareness is the primary intelligence of *citta*. It’s through this that ignorance is removed.

In terms of practice, you don’t go into the tangling energies of ill-will, craving or despond, but stay wide and steady around them. With reference to the bodily aspect of patterning, you slowly extend awareness through the entire body, so that the refined energy of breathing and the uncontracted quality of awareness clear

hindrances. This generates the bright states of rapture and ease; and the mind settles in *samādhi*. In terms of heart, the suffusion is of the intentions of kindness, or compassion, or appreciative joy, or equanimity – so that the contracted or sour heart-energy unfolds into a beautiful abiding: '*abundant, exalted, immeasurable, free from hostility and ill-will.*'[28] Although they have different approaches, their combined cultivation is the kamma that generates the 'great heart'.[29]

In referring to the *brahmavihāra* states, the Buddha uses the simile of someone blowing on a conch to evoke the way that these radiate and suffuse the atmosphere.[30] Exactly what 'tune' one plays depends on the distortion one is healing. There is the bleak 'have to do it on my own' hardness that needs the nourishing quality of kindness; at other times, it's the heart's irritability or vulnerability that calls for compassion, the protective energy. Sometimes it's the case whereby we recognize the harm that comes from neglecting what is good in ourselves and others, or even through taking others for granted. Then the intent to appreciate goodness can arise. It's important to not neglect this: the stream of good deeds that you did do, the kind words that just seemed natural, but were the right thing at the right time, the acts of courtesy or generosity that other people manifest. It's important not to overlook appreciation – because we often do.

Equanimity holds the empathetic space and allows things to unfold. It doesn't ask for results, but attunes to how things are right now. It is where the issue of self comes to an end as we understand kamma. With this, we realize that ultimately no-one did anything: it's just that patterns and programs get established based on reckless actions, and on what each person has had done to them.

In the world in general, there's a huge inheritance of psychological programs based upon violence and deprivation – and who knows where all that began. Under the pressure of desperate need and hopelessness, in a context that is starved of goodwill, or is abusive, *citta* can get so distorted and compressed that it only experiences relief in the blaze of rage and brutality. For example, say your father got brutalized by being in a war; this led to his bouts of depression, explosive rage and drunkenness. You picked up the

results of that, were insecure and became abusive towards yourself and insensitive to others. Where and when do these cycles of violence and punishment and revenge end? Only when we can regard our own and other people's actions empathetically in terms of cause and effect. That regard is equanimity, the most reliable base for action.

Practising The Great Heart

With these *samatha* resources, the *citta* can first meet negative qualities without reacting to them; and then insightfully question whether this or any kammic patterning is who you are. Meeting, rather than analysing or fixing, carries the intent to fully receive qualities as they are; this intent is empathetic, so the mind's energy (which powers that *saṇkhāra*) feels that – and its current is changed. This stops it from creating more tracks and perceptions.

Where body and heart come together is a good meeting place. Normally, as a negative mood or a poignant memory arises, it catches hold and the heart resonates accordingly – so we become that mood, with its characteristic pattern. Being averse to all this and trying to stop it merely adds to the intensity. If you sustain the view that the way you are is because of what others have or haven't done – that resignation closes the heart and locks the pattern into place. If you ignore the nature of your patterning by going out into sights and sounds, tastes and ideas in the present, then you may be unaware of it for a while; but when the music stops ... it's back to 'me' again with the mood swings and jaded self-image. Meanwhile, any acts of denial and distraction have their effects. You activate a *saṇkhāra* track into desolate territory.

Instead, stay with the pattern and feel it in your body. Maybe it feels constricted or numb in places; or gets agitated. This is skilful because trying to directly change your negative mind-state isn't always the remedy – especially if the source of the problem isn't what you've done, but what you've had done to you. If you were bullied at school, or have been discriminated against because of ethnic background or gender, your heart's energy may well have been shaped by that. Understandable as such patterns are, any resultant defensiveness, self-affirmation or counter-attacks still don't

return the *citta* to its easeful or unpatterned state.

To dissolve a negative pattern, you focus on where your body feels the sense of a safe space around it – even if this is as humble as feeling the ground beneath you. Give full attention to the steadiness until that quality attracts heart-energy and your *citta* feels steadier. Then you can gradually draw that steadied awareness over your body. If you can link it to the rhythmic process of in- and out-breathing, that's great, because with mindfulness, the energy of breathing can refine and suffuse any positive effect through the entire nervous system. This takes time, but the energies of passion, sourness, stagnation, restlessness and uncertainty will gradually dissolve into the stream of wholesome energy. This consolidation of awareness embeds the impulsive base of the mind in deeper currents than that of sense-contact and discursive thought. When in touch with this deep foundation, there is a firm ease that checks memories and moods from becoming overwhelming, and makes the *citta* 'great' in terms of its energetic boundaries and capacity.

In tandem with this, you attend to the mood of the mind with empathy. From this perspective, if sorrow or agitation or fear wells up, rather than re-enact old habits of feeling bereft, or of trying to figure out a solution, you silently ask: 'How am I with this, now?' The aim is not to shift away from the topic, but to witness that topic with stable awareness so that some wise seeing can get underneath the story to the emotion. Instead, find a place where you sense ease or steadiness, and spread awareness from that place to the edges of the difficult area. To the extent to which you've strengthened your *citta*, your awareness can be onlooking and compassionate – with, but not in, the pattern. As the energy of the stuck place changes, it can begin to release; the heart can open. Then you centre in its positive current and suffuse afflicted places until the system comes into balance and feels refreshed.

Even if you're feeling fine right now, you should bear in mind that the *citta* does have latent afflictive tendencies. So it's always a good idea to brighten and clean the mind in order to meet what arises in the day. This is basic sanity. If you go into a world of random cause and effect when you're ill-at-ease, tense or depressed, you're leaving yourself wide open to laying down some unskilful kamma. But with

the great heart you won't get knocked about, defensive, or reactive.

Unseating Perfectionism and Living in Balance

A common pattern that forms around negative self-impressions is that of the 'Inner Tyrant'. The Tyrant is the nagging voice that will always demand that you achieve impossible standards of perfection, never offers congratulation or appreciation, exaggerates shortcomings; and based on this, delivers a scolding. Sometimes the Tyrant offers just a cold, condescending stare. Sometimes the Tyrant keeps urging you to do more, to forgive others, to pull yourself together and to take responsibility – advice which may have its place, but is inappropriate when it comes to shifting self-view. It just entrenches the belief that this stuff is what I am. That view carries the weight that we're trying to drop. And it comes from the involuntary action of adopting psychological patterns as 'myself'. Stupid, but we've all done it (there's the belief that I'll find one that is satisfying, and fits!).

The Tyrant's programs arise from a *citta* whenever it lacks stability and empathy; so the Tyrant develops because of a confused, non-empathetic human environment. The social need to get ahead, to be approved of, and to avoid being second-rate doesn't allow for having empathy with what we or others are actually experiencing. Under this pressure, the mind splits into 'how I'm feeling' and 'what I'm supposed to be'. Thus empathy and wholeness get jettisoned, and the pressure gets stuck by being internalized as two conflicting 'selves': the Inner Tyrant – the agent of the pressure – and its victim, 'Little Me'.

Sometimes Little Me rebels, or seeks affirmation in order to become Big Me. And so the Tyrant in the mind creates another self-image which can't sustain itself without continual ego-food. 'I have to be efficient, always obliging and dutiful, yet self-sufficient – and relaxed.' In fact, as long as you keep being Little Me, the victim, you support the fragmentation and the Tyrant. So rather than believe or fight with the Tyrant, or defend Little Me, the way out is to switch off the program through resolving the pattern. In other words, you drop the tendency to make a self-image out of changeable qualities – which indeed may not be ideal or perfect.

(No personal qualities are.)

As you meet the sense of 'it's all up to me', or 'I don't deserve to feel good', or 'I must try harder', you can find areas of your body that feel tense, fidgety or contracted. Then you evoke your Refuge tone, and stay with that until there is some openness or ease – and it affects your body. Then widen awareness to cover the entirety of your embodied field; this suffusive effect restores the balance of the heart.

A balanced heart is naturally empathetic. Then you can direct it to the incapable, the failing, the unnoticed, and the success-failure ripples and patterns – wherever and in whoever they arise. Learn how to meet and relate to, rather than analyse, qualities before doing anything else. In fact, it may be all you have to do in order to touch into the disengagement that allows the heart to open in compassion – towards the Tyrant, Little Me, or anyone. Just to abide in compassionate awareness, not fixing, not blaming and not changing anything, may be exactly what's needed – because then you're not acting from that desperate, judgemental basis. Then you don't have to perform that well to be warm and balanced within yourself. You don't have to look like a supermodel to feel appreciated. You don't have to have things go your way to feel content. You don't need to have one special person in order to feel loved. What is needed is to cultivate great heart. And it arises through accepting and responding to the unsatisfactory condition of personality.

View is the instigator of kamma: as you believe, so do you act. View is a magnet that attracts the energy of will and inclinations: develop a certain attitude and you can be sure that your mind will assemble a reality out of that. But if we notice how the view 'I am' attracts energy ... and how energy creates a pattern ... and a mental pattern becomes a conviction ... and a conviction becomes a standpoint – that's how the isolated self arises. So as long as there is the need for a standpoint, a need to be, and to prove, then that need will support a self-view. Then if there is holding to that standpoint, conflict with others, grievance and resentment will follow in due course.

But if energy can go another way, generating a pattern of groundedness, of empathy, of great heart, the view can shift. It

clears with the insight that ‘all this stuff, all this energy, is invoked by *saṇkhārā*, shaped by consciousness, given meaning by perception, resonating with feeling, productive of intention, and resulting in effects … All this is changing, insubstantial; there is no self in this, and no self can be established apart from this.’ We therefore act with integrity and don’t hang on. And there’s no stress, no weight in that.

24 I don't see a single thing that changes as quickly as the mind.' A.1:48

25 For 'ignorance-contact', see S.22:47.

26 Ānanda, those whom you have compassion for, and those who regard you as worth listening to – be they associates, close friends, kindred or close family – these should be advised about, rooted in and established on three matters. What three? There may be change, Ānanda, in the four great elements – of earth, water, fire and air – but there can be no change in the noble disciple who is endowed with unwavering confidence in the Buddha ... the Dhamma and the Sangha. That is: it is impossible that such a person should be reborn in Hell, or as an animal, or in the realm of hungry ghosts.' A.3:75

27 This process is described in S.42:8.

28 As in S.42:8 and many other places.

29 Great heart: 'Previously, my mind was limited and undeveloped; but now it is measureless and well-developed. No measurable kamma remains or persists there.' A.10:219

30 See S.42:8.

N.B. The classic example of turning kamma around is Angulimāla, who appears in the suttas as a murderer who had killed 999 people before encountering the Buddha. After receiving the teachings, his practice bore fruit in complete awakening. See M.86.

Meditation

Goodwill

Establish your presence in the place where you're sitting, putting other concerns to one side. Then ask yourself, 'How am I right now?' Consider this, with a listening kind of attention. Even as bodily sensations or mind-states change, attend to the more continual overall feeling of how you are with any of this.

If the mind starts spinning with ideas about what you should do or be, widen your awareness around that spin. Don't fix or fight it. Think slowly: 'May I be well' over the span of an out-breath. Add 'May I Iisten to all this, spaciously …'. You may need to go slowly, with long listening pauses between the thoughts, but this could be all you need to do in order to resolve a dilemma.

If you want to take the practice further, consider: 'What would it be like if I was in the presence of someone or something that was regarding me with warmth?' (You can even recollect your dog.) Introduce the thought: 'What would that be like? How would I sense that?' and attend closely to any resonance in the heart. Attune to the tonality of an image and an approach that fits. Listen to that, spaciously.

Recollect any time in your life when someone was glad to see you, did you a favour, gave you some kindly attention, or enjoyed your presence. How is that, now? Ask: 'Does my body know that?' Attend to any drop in tension, or lift in energy – particularly in the face, and in the heart region.

Put aside more general reflections or memories of that person or that time, and return to any specific goodwill moment and how it felt for you. You may repeat this with a few people and several incidents.

When you can establish that process, linger in the heart and bodily effect and lessen the thinking accordingly. Gradually simplify and consolidate the process until you arrive at a simple image (of

warmth or light, for example), or a bodily sense – of ease or joy. Sit in that, sweeping it through your body like a massage. Expand your awareness of the feel of that in terms of your overall disposition until there's no need for the thought process.

As you settle into that, breathe it into your presence. Then expand it out through the skin into the space immediately around you. You may wish to express that benevolence to particular people, or to other beings in general. Notice who easily comes to mind – someone who you readily feel goodwill towards.

Then bring to mind someone whom you have no strong feelings for. Consider seeing them out of the context in which you normally encounter them. Imagine them enjoying themselves, or worried, or in distress. Spend some time rounding out your impression of them in a sympathetic way. 'May he/she be well.' Expand your awareness of the feel of that wish; notice how it affects your overall disposition and body tone. Enjoy feeling more empathically attuned.

Let the feeling and effect of that settle. Then consider someone you have difficulties with. Focus on an aspect of their behaviour that you don't find difficult.

Consider them out of the context in which you normally encounter them.

Imagine them enjoying themselves, or worried, or in distress. Spend some time rounding out your impression of them. Feel what it's like to not feel frightened of, or irritated by, this person. As you sense your own relaxation, bring to mind the thought: 'May we be free from conflict.' Expand your awareness of that wish and energy.

Now it may be possible to just be with, rather than in, yourself. Explore the felt sense of who you take yourself as being; that is, your moods, energies and thought-processes. And however you may be at this moment: 'May this be heard. May I listen to this, spaciously.'

When you wish to conclude, return to the simple presence of the body – the sense of having a centre, with the rest of the body

extending around it to the skin boundary. Settle and stabilize these before you open your eyes.

As a further practice, set up an occasion to listen to another, spaciously and quietly. Let yourself receive the mood and tone as they speak. If need be (agree upon a procedure or a wording before the occasion begins), you might suggest, when they pause: ‘How is it to be with this?’ Also note to yourself how you’re being affected. Remember, this is not a conversation, nor an attempt to explain or change anything. It’s about opening an empathetic space. That will have its own effects.

After ten or fifteen minutes, swap the roles.

5
Regarding the World

Having directly known all the world –
all in the world just as it is –
he is detached from all the world,
ttadisengaged from all the world.
He is the vanquisher of all,
the wise one who has untied all knots.
He has reached the supreme peace,
nibbāna, inaccessible to fear.

A.4:23 – 'The World'

When I visited a monastery in China recently, I met an old monk who presented me with a treasured piece of his own calligraphy, a piece that summed up the view of Dhamma as he understood it. It comprised two ideograms on a scroll: one meaning 'still' and the other meaning 'bright reflection'. The translator interpreted the overall sense to mean something like: 'the quiet, reflective mind that regards the world.' 'Regards the world': there's attention there, but non-involvement – dispassion. Yet that mind keeps regarding the world, not ignoring it: that implies compassion.

Interdependence

What is this world anyway? Socially, psychologically and environmentally, it's a web in which different forces, energies and beings support and condition each other's existence. It's both caused and causative. In ecological terms, this interdependence calls for balance. The Buddha's understanding was that our psychological balance and ethical integrity are essential for a climate that sustains life.[31] Hence his deep commitment to harmlessness and frugality.

However, in referring to 'the world', the Buddha was generally focusing on the personal 'internal' world: the web of causes and

conditions which arises dependent on the consciousness that participates in bodily life. This world is experienced as a series of shifting forms (*rūpa*) that arise dependent on seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching – moment-by-moment data which are tacked together by our minds to form a solid three-dimensional realm. To the casual observer, this reality persists through time.[32] But when it's more deeply and directly known, this world is not experienced as a fixed and stable entity, but as arising a moment at a time.

Furthermore, it is dependently arisen. That is, form becomes present for us dependent on consciousness; and consciousness arises dependent on some form to be conscious of. In detail: mind-consciousness arises as the interpreter and organizer of sense-data and heart-impressions. Without that input, mind-consciousness does not arise. It makes contact, thus generating perceptions that evoke feeling. Feeling and perception arise with contact, and with contact comes more heart-impressions and patterns – as well as programs involved with interpreting, organizing and responding to the impressions that mind has placed in the heart. And so, our world rolls on.

All this interpreting and organizing and feeling is summarized as 'name' (*nāma*), although 'interpretation' might give you a better handle on it.[33] It is through the linking of 'name' to 'form' that an apparently 'outer world' and an 'inner world' co-dependently arise in the dynamic experience of consciousness, name and form.

To illustrate this: in the act of seeing, a visual object is first detected, then lingered over as the mind recognizes it, and designates it with an impression, perception or felt sense, such as 'friend' or 'stranger'. Dependent on that and the current mood or intent, a response arises. One can then linger further and develop possibilities and plans. Regarding all this, we may feel uplifted, overwhelmed or bored by all the *saṇkhārā* – the energies and emotions that come up. Accordingly, 'the world' may seem exciting, dreadful or hum-drum. But it is conditioned, created and creative. And like the ever-changing design of the Mandelbrot set, it can keep going on and on: as the Buddha observed, you don't get to the end of the personal upheavals until you have got to the end of your

world.[34] Moreover, this doesn't happen through moving around the world, running away from it or creating another world, but through contemplating the causal field, and penetrating the basis on which your world arises.[35]

Regarding the world this way leaves open the possibility that each of us, through purifying our 'naming' processes, can affect how the world seems and how we respond to it. Some responses feel balanced; others more compulsive. How are my attitudes colouring what arises? Is some fixed mind-set creating my world and myself as someone embedded in it? We train to acknowledge this so that we can see what needs to be cleared in order to get free. Therefore, the Buddha taught where the world arises and where it stops, and the way to that.

To this end, many of the Buddha's teachings are based on generating bright kamma in daily life. He taught the Eightfold Path to establish purity of intent. If you work with this with regard to people, duties and events, you can live with self-respect, gladness and equanimity. You don't get caught up in the judgements of success/failure, praise/blame; instead, you establish your Path, linger in and savour the good, and work with what arises.

As long as one hasn't developed such skill, the success/failure assessment gets internalized and craving keeps the mind driving on: 'How long is it going to take me to achieve my goals?' That's the world arising, right there; it's a race that can never be won, because the thirst to achieve creates the goal and the self who hasn't achieved it. You climb one mountain, then you need to climb a higher or more risky one. What's driving you? This process will always create stress. Stress can end, however, in accordance with the degree with which one can relinquish that thirst, that goal-orientation, that self. This is what is meant by purifying the intent. It means letting go of the search for fulfilment in terms of 'world'.

Firm Feet, Firm Ground: Pāramī

Does this mean that there's nothing to seek? Not really. Maintaining balance does take some doing; and for the *citta* to find any balanced ground there has to be motivation (*chanda*) towards purity,

integrity and harmony. And this does give a reward in terms of one's innate value or *puñña*, with the stability and good heart that this brings. Accordingly, the persistent cultivation of bright kamma is encouraged. In Buddhist cultures, a useful list of daily life trainings is that of the ten 'perfections' (*pāramī* or *pāramitā*).[36] *Pāramī* are also referred to as 'qualities that cross over [the world]' because by practising them in the everyday world, the mind brings forth bright qualities rather than seeking worldly gain. Avoiding the spin of gain and loss, these *pāramī* give you stable ground.

In the Theravada tradition, the *pāramī* are listed as generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom/discernment, persistence, patience, truthfulness, kindness, resolution and equanimity. All these ask us to bring forth skill in response to what we experience; it's a response which has liberation as its aim. It's good to remember that liberation is not some 'out there' state; it just means the Path and Fruit of letting go of any degree of greed, aversion and delusion – and of the basis on which they arise. Through the practice of *pāramī,* we cultivate action that places qualities, rather than self-image, as the guides on the Path. It's pretty fundamental; without that view, and without sustaining that aim and resolve, you don't have a reliable foundation from which to meet life.

Generosity is about sharing – and not just in material terms. It's an attitude to life; it's a response to the interrelatedness that is the basis of all life. Most importantly, you share Dhamma by advice, and by example. Aiming one's concern and goodwill for the welfare of others as much as for oneself helps to shift the 'self-view' to one in line with co-dependent arising. Action based on that view of interdependence generates a shared blessing. The giver feels joy and the receiver feels the effects of kindness: everyone gains.

Morality leads to self-respect and the trust of people around you. Renunciation draws you out of the grip of the materialist energies that control much of society. Discernment cuts through the blur of feelings to tell you coolly and clearly what qualities are skilful and what aren't at this moment. Such discernment is required to steward and moderate energy so that it isn't frittered away on the one hand, or strained on the other. The result is right persistence. And that brings around patience – to not rush, to allow things to

move at a harmonious rate, and to bear with the tangle of social and personal conundrums that we face. Patience is great for wilful 'got to get it done' mind-sets. There's a whole life of cultivation in this *pāramī* alone.

These *pāramī* are not always on display in the world; nor does their cultivation mean that you become a success in worldly terms. Take truthfulness: it may seem unlikely that you will become the leader of a political party or of a global corporation through such kamma. But maybe. A friend of mine in business told me that, years ago, he vowed to only deal honestly with clients – no false promises, no granting of favours, no illegal dodges. At first his business declined a little, but after a while, as people realized that they could trust that what he said was what he meant, they began to prefer that straight way of dealing and his business increased. Ethical business can make sense. At any rate, you always gain in terms of having self-respect, a clear conscience and friends that you can rely upon. Furthermore, goodwill and resolution will get you through the tough times. When the economy crashes or your health fails, when you're bereaved or blamed, knowing how to live simply and be an equanimous witness to experience are real life-savers.

Latent Tendencies: Stuff Rises Up

Taken as a whole, the practice of *pāramī* sets up values that skilfully direct the mind. Attitudes and energies that go towards self-aggrandizement, manipulation or distraction are cut off. And, as intention gets free of those biases, we notice different things – because what we look for affects what we look at. With worldly conditioning, the mind is focused on material gain, status and superficial appearances. That always brings the need for more, and the fear of losing what's been gained: i.e. stress. But if we look at life in terms of what we can give, rather than gain; if we incline towards valuing patience and resolution rather than quick, short-term results; and if we prioritize our integrity rather than speculate as to whether we are admired or ignored – we notice bright or dark kamma. And we notice how stress arises and how it ceases. Our 'naming' of the world shifts to designate it as a vehicle for value and liberation, rather than a me/them, gain/loss ride on a roller coaster.

However, as you hold to the values of a skilful life, that purifying process reveals dispositions and tendencies that are latent and unresolved. These latent tendencies (*anusaya*) include basic inclinations such as sensual passion, irritation, opinionatedness and conceit – which may not be revealed as such in ordinary life because our ways of operating avoid a thorough investigation of our inclinations. This is why we resolve not to follow the casual slide into worldly values. Instead, we make commitments to acts of value and integrity.

In this respect, Buddhist practice isn't about peak moments. It's about training. It's about strengthening and broadening commitment to standards and virtues, even when the peak experiences aren't rolling in and your unacknowledged tendencies are rising up. In fact, the ordinary situation of living with others is a great opportunity for developing *pāramī*. Through aware interaction, we get to see that our 'naming' – our interpretations of what is normal or friendly, our attitudes around leadership and independence, our sensitivity to other people – differs from other people's 'naming' in the same situation. Responding to this takes a lot of patience, goodwill and commitment in order to clear biases. That gives life a transcendent purpose: it's about freeing the mind from narrow-mindedness, concerns over status, and fault-finding – to name a few aspects of 'self-view'.

I've grown to appreciate this integrated approach, especially as I didn't start my practice from this perspective. In the monastery in Thailand in which I began my training as a Buddhist monk, there was a section set aside for intensive meditation practice. Monks in the monastery would go into this section in order to review and deepen their understanding of Dhamma. They'd generally spend a couple of weeks in there and then return to what they were part of. I was one of the few Westerners; the three or four of us there were all new to Thailand, meditation and monastic life. We had nothing to do, no get-togethers, nowhere to go and no way of returning to what we were part of. Conversation wasn't allowed. It was, as you might guess, pretty stressful being in a small hut all day trying to meditate and watching the mind jump over the monastery wall for hours at a time. The one thing that we did do together was go out on alms-round, in silence, every morning. It was our only occasion

of being together in the entire day; it should have been easy, just walking along receiving offerings. But instead, all kinds of stuff, stuff that wasn't on the enlightenment script, came up.

The first person in my life who said he'd like to kill me, with an axe if possible, was a fellow-monk. Well, I did walk on alms-round at a pace that he felt was too slow, while he had to walk behind me ... As for myself, I can't recall having much of a violent impulse until I became a serious meditating monk ... but now here I was feeling violent towards a monk (another one) walking behind me! After all, the Buddha said we should walk quietly, making little noise, so that we could be calm and focused in order to get enlightened – but every day that monk behind me kept on clearing his throat as we walked along ... That's justification for murder, isn't it?

Naturally, we didn't act on these impulses; we let them pass. Which was a little bit of awakening. There was enough bright kamma to have a sense of morality, and even of mindfulness. However, they blew apart the idea that you don't have ill-will just because in solitude no-one's pushing your buttons. So in terms of the big picture, a murderous impulse was useful: I had to let go of my idea of being a reasonable, easy-going person, and focus on the tendency of ill-will. And further, when I acknowledged that my solitary practice hadn't made it any easier to share the planet for a couple of hours with another harmless human being who shared my interest in awakening, the paradigm of mind-cultivation had to shift. I began to understand that you don't get out of kamma by avoiding it.

The Dependent Arising of the World

> 'This world, Kaccāna, for the most part depends upon a duality – upon the notion of existence and the notion of nonexistence. But for one who sees the origin of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of nonexistence in regard to the world. And for one who sees the cessation of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of existence in regard to the world.
>
> '"All exists": Kaccāna, this is one extreme. "All does not

> exist": this is the second extreme. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathagata teaches the Dhamma by the middle: "With ignorance as condition, volitional formations [saṇkhārā] come to be; with volitional formations as condition, consciousness. ... Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering. But with the remainderless fading away and cessation of ignorance comes cessation of volitional formations; with the cessation of volitional formations, cessation of consciousness. ... Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering."'
>
> (S.12:15; B. Bodhi, Trans.)

One thing led to another, and after three years of practising in solitude, I returned to England for a visit. I stopped off in London, where Ajahn Sumedho was leading a small group of monks. In that community, there was more emphasis on action and interaction, on a detailed training in terms of ethics and frugality, and on mindfulness with regard to using requisites. There was a lot of that kind of attention given to daily life; no competition, and no achievement. It demanded energy: all-night group meditation was a weekly practice, with its too brief highs and too long lows. 'Patient resolve' was the watchword. All this broadened equanimity and deepened awareness. And we were all in it together, so that generated friendship – even when people got stirred up and argumentative at times. That was understood and accepted, and we were encouraged to explore the cause of conflict and stress. The overall theme was to be mindful of whatever the mind brought up and investigate where the suffering was. It made life into a practice of *pāramī*; I made a resolution to stay with it – even though that meant getting stirred up pretty often.

Four Bases of Clinging

It was easy to see and feel where the challenge lay: clinging to my way and wishes. Holding on goes deep. The Buddha spoke of clinging as having four successively deeper levels: clinging to sense objects, to rules and customs, to views, and to impressions of what we are.[37]

The first is fairly obvious – it's about hanging on to possessions, and feeding on sights, sounds and the rest of it. In the monastery, with the limitation on sense-input, and with a good amount of physical work going on, most of this intensity would gather around the one meal of the day, or the hot drink and occasional sweets at tea-time. The very energy of clinging to the felt meaning of getting fed would sometimes send so much energy through the system that to patiently wait for everyone to gather, patiently file through to receive the food, patiently wait for everyone to get back ... then, after chanting the meal-time blessings, to patiently wait for the senior person to begin eating – was quite an achievement! The food itself was nothing special – sometimes I hardly noticed what it was. Moreover, the degree of satisfaction derived from eating was nothing fantastic and was offset by feeling dull afterwards. The passion was all around the *idea*, the felt meaning, of eating. But that impression of gratification, and the appealing nature of the food could shift within minutes. On contemplating the whole issue, it was apparent that the intensity was just around the set of feelings and drives that clinging made solid and real – for a while. Clinging was just clinging to its own interpretations.

I could experience the same clinging occurring in terms of the second level of clinging – with reference to the rules and customs of the monastery. Everyone uses rules and customs to regulate their lives or occupations: forms of etiquette, customs around what food to eat at what time on what day of the week, or around how I like my office to be arranged, as well as religious observances and social taboos. But there's a tendency to go into automatic, or to get dogmatic about one's own system. One feeling I had about committing to Buddhist practice was to get out of this – to be more spontaneous, to live in the here and now. But after about three years with nothing to do, nothing to belong to, and therefore nothing to be spontaneous about, I really appreciated things like morning chanting every day, observances around handling and washing your alms-bowl, and a training in conventions that helped to keep me focused in daily life in a way that wasn't about me achieving or being rewarded. The training just kept placing awareness 'here' in what I was doing.

It was the same with the system of meditation that I was using;

even if I wasn't always good at it, it defined where I was. I got to feel solid. But then there'd be a hunger to get even more solid; to be part of a highly-disciplined outfit and be someone who could sit like a rock with unwavering mindfulness of breathing.

So the snag that I hit was that a subtle condescension crept in for people who weren't so solid, or couldn't keep up; and an outright dismissal of those 'here and now' types who were sloppy and clearly had no sense for resolution.

However, Ajahn Sumedho, the leader of what was supposed to be the crack troop, did from time to time cancel routines, either if he thought people were struggling, or just for a break. Or maybe it was just for us to see what our minds did. He also lessened the intensity of some of the observances, allowing an early-morning mug of porridge because some people weren't so well ... And as for a system of meditation, although he sat in meditation a lot, he didn't use much more of a technique than a basic focus on breathing for starters. The main theme was one of letting go.

It was a complete turn-around from how I had been practising, so it was very confusing for a few years, but it was to the point, and very direct. Let go of clinging. Yes, you do get to recognize that taking hold of a system, firming up and getting righteous

about it, carries the same feel and passion that you can get around a bar of chocolate. It's clinging ... and it means you're about to suffer. And probably to inflict some suffering on someone else.

Much the same thing occurs with the next layer of clinging to views, typified as views of 'becoming and not-becoming'. These are the ways we extend out of direct experience to conjure up a future. That is, we either add continuity, purpose and a trajectory in life, or deny that there is any purpose; we either get involved with action or development, or declare that nothing can really be done – that everything's impermanent so there's no point. This is the underlying view of 'becoming/not-becoming' (*bhava-vibhava*) that makes us unable to relate to the ongoing and uncertain nature of conditions. Those views solidify and spin, sometimes with great conviction. They carry the passion and thirst that initiate kamma, so you don't get out of cause and effect by following their signals.[38] The harder

you work at getting things finished and solid, the more that craving for becoming sets up new goals. But saying that there's no goal, that it's all an illusion and let's not bother with the future – also has its negative effects. Failure to consider cause and effect has definitely affected and continues to affect our environment. Results inevitably proceed from action. So the more immediate goal is to find balance; and act from there.

Our attempts at getting enlightened can follow the becoming/not-becoming bias. Is it about having the Ultimate Experience of Deathlessness; or is it about the Final Cessation of Nibbāna? Either way, the clinging to these ideas comes from views that configure either some Timeless Ground of Being or a Blissful Oblivion as the goal. And these depend on whether the self-view inclines towards becoming or towards not-becoming. We probably switch from one to the other dependent on whether we're feeling upbeat or fed-up, or just as our energies fluctuate. Of course, it doesn't make sense because the underlying bias varies: one moment we want an experience, and the next we want to get away from experiencing anything. A good question to ask dispassionately is: 'Who's doing that?' and that takes us to the fourth layer of clinging – clinging to self. Clinging to the tendency of becoming or not-becoming generates the self who will be, or who will be eliminated. But any idea of self arises within awareness. And it changes all the time, such as from confident and relaxed to anxious and tense. Notice the itch and the thirst to be successful – or even a failure – as long as you're being *something*. As this urge affects the mind with regard to any form, any thought and any scenario, so feelings and impressions get clung to and become solidified into a self who is the agent or victim of the world. And that world, whether it be a sublime, immaterial 'Ultimate Reality', or the 'authentic, pure Buddhist tradition', or the benighted and unjust world of geopolitics, is then regarded as a foundation for a view and inclination with regard to the world it's created. Essentially, 'self' and 'world' arise interdependently as two ends of the same designation process; my self is embedded in my world. With this, skills and advantages get tainted with conceit and the urge for more, and negative conditions arouse despond or irritation. There's plenty of room for suffering, and no end to the goings-on that occur around identification. So the four bases give us windows through

which to contemplate clinging. In themselves, material food and the rest of it are useful. Rules and customs are useful guides, and in order to do anything well, you have to have a point of view and take into account your own energies, inclinations and skills. But there is also a need to witness and contain the passion and clinging around all this. This is the purpose of cultivating *pāramī:* to check, witness and move through the mind's assumptions and resistances. Then, if you stay focused at the place where the mind lets go, there is a sense of ease and spaciousness. You get a glimpse of non-clinging.

However, you don't resolve and clear these programs with *pāramī* alone. Cultivating *pāramī* develops one's intent to the point where one can have a choice over whether to act upon them or not; but the tendencies remain as potentials in the mind, ready to engender more problems. To clear the tendencies of ignorance and becoming takes the factors of awakening (*bojjhanga*).

Factors of Awakening: The Work of Release

What is often most disturbing about latent tendencies, particularly when they rise up as 'outflows' (*āsavā*), is that they appear as out-of-control states where we become other than who we think we are[*] These outflows can flood the heart with infantile rage, or create a self who is a victim of fear. This is because these tendencies are rooted at a reflex level, a psychological 'place' that precedes our personality. Even a baby has these.[39]

It's also the case that we're not always clear about what tendencies remain latent and unresolved. Most obviously, ignorance, the loss of stable awareness, is a fundamental tendency that, by definition, we're not clear about. So we might feel quite balanced and at ease ... but then, over an exchange as to who does what in the kitchen, experience a threat to our territory, or a loss of status – and up springs ill-will, self-view, a search for the 'right' way, the 'fair' system ... and so on. The lesson is that unless we give up the 'naming' out of which all states arise, the latent tendencies to doubt, to views, to becoming and to identification remain unresolved.

What's needed then is to penetrate the 'naming' process and what it's based on. This comes down to maintaining mindfulness and investigation around the arising and passing of feeling, perception and intention. Conducted with ongoing persistence, this mindful inquiry leads into other factors of awakening – rapture, tranquillity, concentration and equanimity. These all feel agreeable, *and* they do a good job: they can resist clinging and clear ignorance.[40]

As these factors are developed, you can see how mental feeling, perception and programs in particular rise up and condition each other. This is all cause and effect, kamma, and not a self. And even if craving remains hidden as a justifiable need or casual interest, when these factors of awakening have been cultivated, the activity of clinging stands out. Because when you have a reference to tranquillity, spaciousness and inner silence, you can know clinging by how it feels – as a certain tightening in the body/mind. You also recognize the voices – the self-interest, righteousness, or sneakiness – through which it speaks.

Through contemplating any of these signs, you understand that clinging isn't owned: 'I' arises as a result of the action of clinging, rather than before it. I don't decide: 'I'll cling today, and see how much suffering I can create for myself.' So it's not the case that 'I have a lot of attachments, and cling a lot'; it's just that the origin of clinging has not been seen. Clinging is an action, not a person. Understanding this encourages us to find out how to stop that grasping reflex.

The factors of rapture and tranquillity are important in relaxing that grasp. They help to ease up one of the thirsty issues of self: can I feel good? But there's more to them than a little ease: the way they occur in meditation also relaxes the self as do-er. You don't *do* rapture and tranquillity; they come to you, when the mind is settled in its meditation theme. The experience is rather like being a boat that's beached in the sand: as the tide comes in, first there's the gentle touch of something uplifting; then as this gradually increases, the boat floats. But it's not capsized. So we can let go of 'self as do-er', without having to be 'self as impervious' or 'self as collapse.' And then: what does that feel like? How is that quality of openness furthered? Tranquillity gives you the ease and sensitivity, and

there's the need to develop that so that the psychologies based on 'me trying' give up. The required action is psychological: to stay with and trust this meditative process. As mental and somatic tensions relax, the factor of *samādhi* arises with the unification of bodily and mental energies. With that steady sensitivity, the old kamma of defending and struggling can be released.

This release is as much at an energetic as a psychological or emotional level. The causal field is a web of energies that can form blockages and numbness or exert pressure – even cause headaches. These energies are embodied at an involuntary level where we're 'not ourselves.' In other words, release is not only dependent on attitude or understanding; it also depends on switching off the momentum of habitual programs. Release takes factors that are not about me trying or me doing it; it entails going into the reflex for craving, clinging and becoming in our wiring, and letting go right there. To sustain that letting go, we need the cumulative effect of all the factors of awakening, and not just some mindfulness or understanding.

The power that *samādhi* instils in awareness holds calm and ease at this reflex level; then it allows awareness to see how things are (*yathābhūtaṃ ñānadassanaṃ*). What is seen is that becoming and self are unfulfilling programs; in knowing this, the mind stops following them. There is the stillness of equanimity, the final factor of awakening, and release from self-construction: relinquishment (*vossagga*). Awareness is the stillness. This is the place of giving up – where nothing need be said or done.

So it's not just a clinging to sense-input or systems or views that needs to be dissolved. It's a matter of dissolving the basis of ignorance and thirst: that 'naming' basis of mind.[41] This is how one's world ends.

Knowledge and Action

One consequent result is knowledge of dependent arising. That is, there are dependently-arisen states that lead to suffering, solidification of world and self; and there are dependently-arisen states that lead to release. The former depend on ignorance; the

latter arise in accord with Dhamma (*dhammatā*).[42] Dependent on factors of awakening, the biases are removed from the mind that gave rise to a sense of inadequacy, feeling hard done by, frustration, worry, uncertainty about what one is or should be, and the planning that is supposed to make one's world comfortable. And so on. With the fruition of Dhamma, one's world doesn't arise: there is an end to that kamma.

But to integrate that relinquishment of self-view in terms of action, the ongoing path of our lives is to maintain the spiritual values that benefit the shared domain. As you clear the layers of assumptions about life in the world – that it should always feel good, make sense and provide you with fulfilment – you place your trust in good heart and association with good people as being the foundation for engaged life. To see and bring forth the good in others, you cultivate good heart; to cultivate good heart, you associate with good people. We acknowledge the parents who kept us alive and psychologically intact for years; we acknowledge the great gift of receiving teachings, and of having a teacher. And without having taken precepts, having committed to a convention and a practice, would the crucible for liberation have been set up? Without training the mind in meditation, would the chemistry that transmutes kamma into liberation have taken place?

What arises from such inquiry is the wish to serve; to follow what calls forth good heart. To have regard for the world and for healing its suffering: this is compassion. To regard it steadily: this is dispassion. Regarding the world takes a bright, still mind.

* The term '*āsavā*' refers to a disease whereby a tree's vital sap leaks out. Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi uses the word 'taints' for *āsavā*, but to me this word doesn't capture their power. As another term, 'floods' (*ogha*) covers the same three references, that these *āsavā* have an overwhelming, flooding effect. Another translation of this word is 'influx' – referring to how toxic energies flood into the mind.

31 Pointing to famine in his own time, the Buddha remarked: 'at present people are excited by illicit lust, overcome by unrighteous greed, afflicted by wrong Dhamma. When this happens, sufficient rain does not fall ... the crops become blighted and turn to straw.' A.3:56

32 'That in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world – this is called the world in the Noble One's Discipline. And what, friends, is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world? The eye is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world. The ear ... The nose ... The tongue ... The body ... The mind is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world. That in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world – this is called the world in the Noble One's Discipline.' S.35:116

33 'Name' (or 'interpretation') is made up of feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), intention/volition (*cetanā*),

contact-impression (*phassa*), attention (*manasikāra*).' M.9:54; S.12:2

34 'I say that without having reached the end of the world there is no making an end to suffering. It is, friend, in just this fathom-long body endowed with perception and mind that I make known the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world and the way leading to the cessation of the world.' S.2:26; A.4:45

35 The origin and ceasing of the world: 'And what, bhikkhus, is the origin of the world? In dependence on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, feeling; with feeling as condition, craving; with craving as condition, clinging; with clinging as condition, [becoming]/existence; with [becoming]/existence as condition, birth; with birth as condition, ageing-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair come to be. This, bhikkhus, is the origin of the world.' [*And the same for the other senses, including mind. The ceasing of the world follows the same sequence up to craving, then:*] '… with the remainderless fading away and ceasing of that same craving comes cessation of clinging … cessation of birth, ageing-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair.' S.12:44

36 In the early texts, the major discourses of the Pali Canon, there is no listing of these *pāramī*. Reference to them comes in the later books of the Canon – such as the *Jātaka* – and in the sixth century CE commentary

Visuddhimagga. There are, however, plenty of examples of the Buddha and his disciples practising morality, renunciation, persistence and the rest. The Mahayana texts and tradition refer to six *pāramitā*: generosity, morality, patience, energy, meditation and wisdom, and make much of these as essential Bodhisattva practices. That they occur with variations in Theravada and Mahayana seems to suggest that they were formulated as the early Buddhism out of which they both evolved was developing in a range of directions in India.

v7 These four bases of clinging are the topic of M.11.

38 'Whatever recluses and brahmins have said that freedom from [becoming] being comes about through some kind of [becoming] being, none of them, I say, are freed from becoming. And whatever recluses and brahmins have said that escape from [becoming] being comes about through [not-becoming] non-being, none of them, I say, have escaped from [becoming] being. This suffering arises dependent on clinging. With the ending of all clinging, no suffering is produced.' *Udāna* 3:10

39 'For a young tender infant lying prone does not even have the notion "personality," so how could personality view arise in him? Yet the underlying tendency to personality view (*sakkāyaditthi-anusaya*) lies within him.' M.64:3

40 These factors of awakening are themselves a form of

kamma: ‘And what is kamma that is neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright result, leading to the ending of kamma? Mindfulness as a factor for awakening, [exploration] investigation of qualities … persistence … rapture … tranquillity … concentration … equanimity as a factor for awakening.’ A.4:238

41 The ‘break up of name and form’ is synonymous with awakening. See D.11:85, S.1:23 and S.1:27.

42 An example of *dhammatā* is in A.11:2, where the Buddha outlines a sequence of practices beginning with moral training and culminating in awakening. Moral conscience and concern also begin the causal sequence of factors leading to liberation in A.7:65. Also see the inset panel in Chapter 3. A.8:81; A.10:1-4

Meditation

Meeting Your World

Establish a supportive bodily presence: a sense of uprightness, with an axis that centres around the spine. Connect to the ground beneath and the space above and around the body. Acknowledge sitting within a space, taking the time that you need to settle in. As you settle, let your eyes gently close. Attune to the bodily sense in any way that encourages stability and ease.

If you feel unsettled – by thoughts, stirred-up moods or sagging energy – draw attention down your back to the ground, allowing the front of the body to flex freely with the breathing. Refer to the 'descending breath' – down through the abdomen – if you feel bustling or uptight. Attune to the 'rising breath' – up through the chest and throat – if you feel sunk or flat. As you come to a sense of balance, bring to mind a current situation in your life. It may well be the case that if you ask yourself: 'What's important for me now?' or 'What am I dealing with now?' a meaningful scenario will come to mind. It could be about something at work, or to do with your close friends or family, or your well-being or your future. Just get the overall impression of that, without going into the full story. It could trigger a flurry of expected possibilities, or a heavy sense of having no choice; it could be the 'so much to do...' or the 'I really need this...,' or 'he she/they think this about me and it's not true.' Try to catch and distil the emotive sense: burdened, eager, agitated – or whatever. As it becomes distinct, feel the energy, the movement of that (even if you can't quite put it into words). For example, is it a racing sense, a buoyant one, or giddy, or locked? Keep triggering that sense by bringing the scenario to mind until you feel you have the tone of that.

Then contemplate that sense in terms of the body. Notice whether, for example, you feel a flush in your face or around your heart, or a tightening in your abdomen, or a subtle tension in your hands or jaw or around your eyes. If the topic is very evocative, you may feel a flurry and then be filled with such a flood of thoughts and emotions that you lose awareness of your body.

If so, open your eyes, breathe out and in slowly and wait for things to become steady again. Then as you re-connect to, or sustain, your embodied awareness, sense that emotive affect again ... which area of the body is affected? And as you focus on the bodily affect, what mood does that bring up? Is it positive, something that there is an eagerness for, so that the body sense seems to rise up and open? Or is it negative, accompanied by a sinking or tightening in the body? Whatever it is, create an attentive space around the experience: can you be with this for a little while?

Let the awareness of, the 'being with', fully feel the tone of that experience. It may settle into an image – such as a bright stream, or something dark and heavy, or something twisted and stuck. Ask yourself: 'What does this look (or feel) like, right now?' Then, as you settle with it for a few seconds, bring up the question: 'What does this need?', or 'What does this want to do?' Follow with attention anything that happens to that sense of reaching out, or sinking back, or tension. There may have been an emotional shift – of relief or compassion. Perhaps parts of your body were affected: say you experienced a tightness in the abdomen and when you attended to your topic, lines of energy were experienced in your chest. Be with the enlarged experience, noticing any changes in the emotive sense. When things feel freer, ask yourself, with curiosity: 'What is this response?' Does something now seem obvious to you?

Carefully repeat this with that aspect of your world until you feel that something has shifted in your response, or that it has given you a key to deeper understanding. You may sense a letting go, or a firming up of your intentions.

Return through the body: to the central structure and the softer tissues wrapped around that, the skin around that, the space around all that. Slowly open your eyes, attuning to the space, and the sense of the place that you're sitting in.

6
The Kamma of Relationship

'And how is it, bhikkhus, that by protecting oneself one protects others? By the pursuit, development, and cultivation [of the four establishments of mindfulness].
It is in such a way that by protecting
oneself one protects others. …

'And how is it, bhikkhus, that by protecting others one protects oneself? By patience, harmlessness, lovingkindness, and sympathy. It is in such a way that by protecting others one protects oneself.'

S.47:19 – 'At Sedaka'

Even when meditating on your own seems fine, you may notice that social contact stirs you up. Opinions about others, concern, attraction, irritation: how to resolve all that? How do we establish guidelines to help form healthy relationships? Is skill in relating to others even necessary for liberation?

The Community of Value

Well, we exist due to relationship; we all needed several people to even get born, let alone to survive infancy and learn about being human. We model ourselves on other people, from whom we learn a language and any kind of moral behaviour. A life without good friends is narrow and bleak; and families, friendships and communities thrive or splinter dependent on how skilful the relationships are. Our lives as individuals are blessed by good people: we can't see our own blind spots, so it takes wise and compassionate companions to point these out in a way that is supportive rather than judgemental. For this reason, the Buddha greatly valued spiritual friendship (*kalyāṇamitta*), and considered association with wise people to be one of the requirements for 'stream-entry', the first level of awakening.[43]

Given the variable nature of social relationships, the most reliable thing to belong to is a field of value such as this. To belong to the group no matter what it's doing, or to follow a leader because they make promises is unwise: we enter a relationship of infantile dependence or of being dumbed down. Not only is such false association personally unreliable – given the power that comes with group belief and action – it can be a danger to humanity. We can all attest to the destructive ideologies that masses of people have adopted – often incited by promises of wealth, or by the power of a charismatic leader. So we need to personally connect with a Way, a Dhamma, that is free from contaminations and offers clarity and integrity. When this freedom is accessed by anyone who cultivates that Way, the community of value arises as a collective that enriches and is for the welfare of all.

Kalyāṇamitta is therefore not just a matter of friendship; it's about a shared commitment to values that don't harm or exploit others. It grows through cultivating relationships that steadily bring integrity, compassion and inquiry into a living focus. Such aspiration, effort and benefit form the spiritual communion that has involved millions of people throughout history. This living and ongoing legacy of skilful actions, aspiration and understanding is a 'field of value' (*puññākhettaṃ*) that can keep extending its boundaries.

To belong to such a community entails steady practice. It means that rather than compete, compare and focus on each other's personal idiosyncrasies, we attune to the bright kamma in ourselves and others, and develop through acting and interacting in its light. To see and respect the good in ourselves and to be keen to live that out – this is conscience (*hiri*); then to see and respect the good in others, and to be keen to live in accordance with that – this is concern (*ottappa*). Conscience and concern are called 'the guardians of the world' – and as long as we listen to their advice, our personal world is aligned to the integrity and empathy that support awakening.

We can lose touch with that integrity and empathy if we neglect valuing our own actions and those of others. This devaluing occurs when we see each other, not as fellow subjects, but as objects compounded of wishful fantasy or anxiety. This seeing of another

through one's own tinted lens is the 'self and other' program. In this, we might expect other people to embody our ideals – and consequently get critical when they don't live up to them. We might also project our fears onto others; or imagine that everyone else is enlightened or near it, and we are the laggards of the group. Or that people expect us to be something we're not. All of these are negative mental kamma: the mind has adopted a view that divides 'us' into 'self and other' rather than directly relating to another with respect, appreciation and compassion: just as we would like to be related to.

Of course, it's not that all aspects of anyone's behaviour are flawless, or that we ourselves always see things from an undistorted perspective – but how else can good qualities arise if we don't acknowledge our potential for them? It's not as if we can make goodness appear where there isn't a basis. So, the field of value offers the common ground in any misunderstanding. That common ground is remembered and brought into play whenever we touch into the qualities of integrity and empathy in ourselves, and ask another to do the same. Then there can be a dispassionate expression of how we see things, and a similar listening.[44] Mutual respect and equanimity can show us where we're mistaken, or where ignorance has taken over the heart – and at the same time present trust and friendship.

So when there is deep attention in the relational experience, the heart also finds access to the inspiration and compassion that give it strength. We all have a measure of good-heartedness, and as we tune in to that capacity in ourselves and others, it grows. Then we can enjoy the nourishment of kindness, or the protective care of compassion, or the joy of appreciation, and the equanimity to hold the space that allows emotions to arise and pass. These measureless qualities soften and even eradicate notions about self and others; they are even called 'doors to the Deathless'.[45]

The Relational Vortex: Becoming, Conceit and Proliferation

'Self and other' is a divisive program, for sure. And it begins with

birth. With the arising of consciousness (*viññāṇa*), our sense of being something is established on the sense of being *within* something: a womb, a family, a nation, a world-order and so on. This is how it happens: operating through the physical senses and the object-defining mind, 'consciousness' is 'consciousness *of*' – a sight, sound, touch , thought and so on. Consciousness therefore gives rise to contact. With contact, comes the experience of being contacted – heart-impressions occur. Thus relational awareness, *citta* as 'heart', gets activated: the heart experiences feeling and felt sense, and wants to be safe, stable and comfortable. As the affect-and-response program of *citta-saṇkhāra* forms a subject that's being affected by an object, it kindles a psychological craving to solidify into a subject who feels secure and comfortable. Then, as this craving for being something (*bhava-taṇhā*) is contextual, it orients around oneself and one's body, oneself and one's territory, oneself and one's role or job – but above all, it orients around oneself and other people. We want to know who we and others are, and where we stand – not just to learn how to work together, but in order to establish a secure identity. From this relational vortex of 'self and other', there thus arises the notion of a personal self. Holding a body as a boundary, and being locked into programs that juggle with the variables of the social world, is self-view (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*).

Craving to be or to become also extends into how secure I will be in the future, and into making notes on self-impressions from the past in order to determine 'that's who I am.' This identity program begins as *citta* clings to my appearance and actions and goes on to cling to what is felt, conceived and programmed. Then becoming gives rise to an identity, and 'I am' is born: 'I am an ageing, middle-class man who can't understand the internet.' Or 'I am a shy person when it comes to public gatherings.' And as if that isn't enough, the *citta* is also flooded by the urge to not be (*vibhava-taṇhā*) as in 'I want to get out of this situation/mind-state/experience of being incompetent'; 'let me not be seen.' So there can be tidal flows of 'wanting to be' and 'wanting not to be' as the urge to be accepted and liked by others builds up performance strategies and anxiety to become the winner, to the point where a person wants to be left alone or escape – through drink and drugs if need be.

The heart is relational by nature and so the references and

programs that get established through relationship are pivotal. If what we're born into is giving us messages of welcome and trust, then our references and programs get formed on a foundation of basic confidence in being here. But if it's the other way around ... if we have been fed biases, exaggerations and falsehoods; if we're told by our family or society that we're worthless, a threat or an expendable burden – we become insecure and confused, and possibly violent. If we get the message that we have to be productive, intelligent and attractive – then even though we may personally acquire those qualities, we do so from a basis of anxiety, and hence still experience that 'not good *enough*' sense.

So, if our intrinsic worth isn't valued, we have to seek value through achievement, know-how, physical appearance, rebellious independence and so on. In such cases, the relational basis is replaced by strong individuation – 'do it and get it by yourself' – with a weak feeling for sharing, empathy or integration with others. But how can a self be separate from others? Instead, the urge for a strong, successful and independent self is a condition for narcissism, arrogance and relational dysfunctionality. History is full of brilliant but neurotic geniuses, ego-centred powermongers, and psychopaths with formidable powers of mind.

It's worse still if we can't achieve value through our own individual efforts: we experience ourselves as worthless. And if the judge of self-worth is our own performance-driven psychology, there's always a 'better' or 'higher' that we can imagine becoming. So we never come out as winners. This loss of worth, or sense of being driven, can result in breakdowns, depression, substance abuse and even suicide. *If*, that is, the underlying relational quality is one of the desire to be a perfect self who gets their way, is never criticized and who feels understood.

Although such self-views are often the case in societies where there is considerable stress on individual achievement and little sense of innate belonging, not all societies operate this way. I remember reading an account of a game played by a tribe living in the Amazon basin. The British field-worker who was observing the game couldn't understand the rules at first. He noticed that the players of the game would split into two teams, who were not

necessarily equal in terms of numbers or apparent strength. Each team would grab a large log, and, hoisting it onto their shoulders, start running towards a point a hundred metres or so ahead. The logs also were not the same size or weight. As he watched, one team would draw ahead of the other, and as it did so, a member of the leading team would leave his or her team and join the other team. If a team was in the lead, members of that team would peel off and join the losing team. As the finishing line drew into sight, the excitement would rise until the teams crossed the line, often with very little distance between them. Eventually the field-worker found out the aim of the race: it was to have both teams cross the line at the same time! That aim was carried out through attention and strenuous effort, but with an overriding benevolent intent to arrive at a place with no winners and no losers.[46]

Expanding our attention and intention to include others gives us plenty to work on. But bear in mind that relationship also includes how we relate to ourselves. One can avoid or suppress anxiety or self-criticism to a degree, but that gets more difficult to do when one meditates – if, that is, instead of jumping into a meditation program, we open attention and listen in a receptive way. For many people, that open regard evokes uncertainty: 'What should I do? How am I doing? What comes next?' This is the uncertainty that also plays out in relationship with others: 'Am I acceptable to him or her? What do they see me as?' Then the thirst for becoming forms self and other based on anxiety.

This crystallization is what the Buddha called 'conceit' (*māna*), the process that weaves qualities that arise in one's awareness into entities that apparently exist independently. Along with conceit come the comparisons and shifting hierarchies that form the view (*diṭṭhi*): 'I'm this and the other is that.' Or 'I'm feeling this, but I should feel something else.' And from that foundation of thirst, conceit and the view that 'I'm this, but I should be that,' the process called 'proliferation' (*papañca*) spins out narratives.[47]

The Good Friend

'He gives what is beautiful,
hard to give,
does what is hard to do,

endures painful, ill-spoken words.

‘His secrets he tells you,
your secrets he keeps.

‘When misfortunes strike,
he doesn’t abandon you;
when you’re down & out,
doesn’t look down on you.

‘A person in whom these traits are found,
is a friend to be cultivated
by anyone wanting a friend.’

(A.7:36; Thanissaro, trans.)

Making and adopting views of self is a basis for mental kamma; and mental kamma, for good or bad, is no small matter. Moreover, for the unawakened heart, this mental kamma occurs by default; that is, the kamma of becoming and conceit takes its cues from the old kamma of the mental tendency that is dominant at the time. In the case of someone who grew up in a family or society that didn’t see value as being intrinsic to being human, but rather gave the message that what you are isn’t good enough – the tendency is to feel anxious and unwelcome. And that affects the way you configure yourself and others.

To give an example: somebody makes a remark and that stands out. We notice it and think: ‘That sounded hostile to me.’ Obviously, we are all programmed to be sensitive to threat; based on that program, a felt meaning of those words occurs that will shape our actions and reactions around that experience. (A similar process could of course occur over them *not* expressing the gratitude or the consideration that we expect: here the bias is our sensitivity around not being welcomed or respected.) In either case, if such impressions are not filtered by deep attention, the underlying bias is not revealed and checked: ‘True, there can be threat. But is *this* actually a threat, and what is threatened?’ ‘Does this *really* mean I am unwelcome?’

Bearing in mind the fact that a lot of actions are not accompanied

by deliberate intention but by muddled impulses, a review is worthwhile. Otherwise, if there is inadequate attention to the qualities that are affecting the *citta*, the mind conceives self and other based on that felt meaning. Then it proliferates and magnifies the experience in line with the intensity of the initial impression. And we get overwhelmed with proliferating views – such as 'deliberate', 'aimed at me' and 'he always'. A fatalist view can also get established: 'I always have to put up with inconsiderate people.'

If we act and react psychologically, verbally or physically in accordance with these views, our minds stir up a sequence of thoughts and strategies that firm up the bias of those felt meanings. Eventually the process solidifies into a self-view: 'I'm seen as stupid or weak', 'me, the despised, me the victim', 'him, that pushy, insensitive pig'. Old programs run out that define ourselves and others, and our attitudes and actions take shape around them. Thus, through unmediated engagement with a perception, an existing bias is confirmed, a self and other established, and the basis for dark kamma laid down.

We could see things another way. We could shrug off the incident and decide not to engage with our interpretation: the remark was just a remark. But more to the point is to put aside adjudicating over the *situation*, and instead look to clearing the proliferations. True enough, if we feel that others are being disrespectful or downright hostile – well, maybe they are! But can we refrain from the proliferations that stick in our heart and add more negative patterns? What is more accurate is not that 'she's always like this' but that 'this habitual experience (of mistrust, etc.) arises when she says that, or when I look at that expression on her face.'

Through attending deeply, you can notice that although proliferation floods the *citta* with details, it deprives you of full presence: steady bodily presence gets lost, as does your ability to respond carefully and mindfully. That loss is a mark of ignorance; it robs you of groundedness, empathy and clarity. What is needed then is mindfulness of the heart, with the patience to allow a compassionate response – to self and other as these arise in awareness.

Kalyāṇamitta as a Practice

This response is the direct practice of *kalyāṇamitta*. It begins with finding someone who models stability, empathy and clarity. A person who does more than say some well-meaning things, but also has the capacity to listen deeply without getting fazed or reactive. If you resonate with such a person, other qualities flow on: you meet, take in and feel the gist of what the speaker is saying. There is a non-attached engagement. Sometimes this is all that's needed: to be able to speak, be heard and give deep attention to what occurred as one spoke. A *kalyāṇamitta* may or may not act as a teacher, but in any case has the respect to not barge in with lectures and 'what you need to do is …' This is because a true *kalyāṇamitta* understands that the *citta* can only learn from its own deep attention; that the purpose of wise companionship is to help us to listen to ourselves with dispassion. *Kalyāṇamitta* is thus about encouraging the Dhamma that's 'knowable in oneself' (*paccataṃ*) and not about giving lectures.[48]

The trust of another helps us to learn to trust our own capacities. It is an act of faith. Otherwise, becoming and conceit come up with the assumption that there's something wrong with 'me', and I have to do something to make myself other than I am. This self-view can't succeed. But clearing ignorance and imbalance doesn't happen through simply affirming that 'there's nothing wrong with me.' That's just another self-view. Moreover, conceiving based on fortunate states such as 'I am a genius/enlightened' keeps needing more of the affirmation, approval or adoration of others. That's also imbalanced. Clearing these imbalances only comes through suspending the assumption 'I am' for a while, and giving deep attention to qualities and energies that cause or release stress. So, if you want to be a true Dhamma friend to another, encourage this – and model it.

To become a true friend you don't need to be full of ideas. The true friend begins in yourself, through cultivating and relating to balanced ease in the body; that helps to cut off the self-other proliferation. Aspects of the body may still get stirred by emotions, but the body doesn't proliferate. So you can listen deeply, feel and be affected – but not fabricate 'self and other' out of that. Instead,

when there is an emotional surge, you widen and extend awareness from the activated parts (often the abdomen, the chest and the face) to include the back, legs and feet, so the energy of the stirred-up state can level out and even discharge. This brings the heart and mind into balance; and it is only from that basis that you can get a feel for simple threads of emotional ease and psychological space. It's a shift from being tense or on guard to something more trusting, something intimate but not personal. Through attending to this firm but open state, you can step back from the personal biases, interpretations, old narratives and judgements. The natural result is true balance.

As heart-energy settles, you can extend the quality of that trust and benevolent intent into all the tissues and structures of the body; then extend that into the space around you: 'May all this be free from harm or stress.' You can then more specifically extend that to impressions of other people, especially those who mean a lot to you, both good and bad: either friends, or people you have difficulties with. Through meeting the qualities that come up as you attend to self and others, you cultivate value; you appreciate, release and forgive.

The mind that looks out from that fullness of heart can also inquire into any conceit, any notion of 'I am this', 'she is that'. Is the president that commanding entity that we like or dislike when he or she is asleep, or sick? How would we see them if they lost a child? Who is the comedian when they're in deep stress about their mother's dementia? How evil is the criminal who acted like that because they were abused by their parents, had little education and felt left behind by the mainstream of society? And, to bring the focus back home, when the mind/heart is conceiving people in critical or stereotyped ways, how deep is the attention?

If we're brooding over the faults of others, the heart is constricted and it can't access the energy that supports full awareness. If there is a negative conceit, our hearts narrow and close down. On the other hand, a conceiving that blindly adores other people reduces discernment and sets us up for wanting more contact with the one who will make life perfect. Then again, we may indeed wish to avoid relationship altogether – but that sets up another negative

relational quality. After all, we do share the planet with seven billion (and rising) other humans, and there's only so many dogs, mountain tops and computer games from which you can derive a comfortable relational experience before there are problems with the neighbours, with the weather, and with your own mind. The good times alone won't set you free.

What is needed?

A Mutual Life

Any self-view needs some solid ground, some ideological viewpoint or fixed mood or context to stand on; it craves solidity in what changes. And what is the success rate of that search? Do you ever get five stars? Does anyone? Is there such a thing as a self that has become solid? And yet is any self contented with being an ever-changing flow of qualities? The only free space and open ground is in the heart that knows letting go.

What hinders access to that are fetters (*saṃyojana*) that form a self, where there are only changeable qualities. These fetters come in clusters, of which the first three – 'personality (or 'self') view' (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*), 'uncertainty' (*vicikiccā*) and 'fixation on systems and customs' (*sīlabbattapāramāsa*) – bind the heart to personhood. And personhood is insecure. That is, our personality arises dependent on social interactions that are always subject to change, so we can never guarantee that we'll arrive at a comfortable and approved-of state in the future. Hence uncertainty and anxiety arise – so, to make our lives predictably steady, we grab hold of socially-approved systems and customs. The result of this tangle is stress – because all conditions change.

In terms of Dhamma practice, these fetters bring around clinging to the neat structure of one's ideas rather than penetrating the nature of thought and concepts. This provides the individual with an intellectual standpoint, but far from releasing the mind, it limits the Dhamma to that person's opinions. If, on the other hand, we disengage from trains of thought and attend to thinking as a process, we notice that ideas dazzle and stir the mind; they are attractive and they do give rise to a sense of certainty – but in

themselves they come and go. They only provide certainty if they're held onto – and that both generates conflict in those who have other ideas, and tightens energy in the head. In the grip of ideas, people can get dogmatic and generally obnoxious.

A deeper sense of confidence in the Dhamma arises through seeing things as they are; that they arise and pass into something wordless and open. Since that experience is peaceful, the restrictive and constructed nature of conceptual experience loses its attraction. Thus there can be a letting go of fixed positions, and the arising of harmony and balance.

The search for a secure standpoint for the self is also the drive behind bonding to systems and customs. We get to know the 'right way' of doing things, and even of practising Dhamma, and the mind hangs onto it and looks down on others. The 'right way' is the way I see things; it's the proper, fair and effective system or custom according to my conditioning – and there's a self-view in that. This view doesn't always stand out; it's not as if we are mentally intoning 'mine, me, this is my self.' In fact, it's often the opposite: as Buddhists, we think: 'this is not "me" or "mine" – but things should be *this* way, this is *right*.' This is because the way things should be, or seem to be, qualifies how I sense myself – as in touch with the truth or on the winning team. If I uphold that 'right way', then I gain value. I may even gain others' respect by sacrificing my apparent self for the sake of the ideals that I have projected onto the group. But we can get attached to that self-denial view, and then feel affronted when others aren't as heroic. 'How come she's so laid-back and finding it all so easy!' 'Why isn't he practising as intensely as I am!'

For example, from time to time we have people in the monastery who are very diligent in the meditation hall ... but difficult to work with in the kitchen because they have to have things done their way. That's not right, is it? Yet generally their actions are based on what they find to be the most efficient way of operating in order to provide food for the community. So that sounds right. ... Then maybe someone talks during times of silence ... which is wrong! But they felt that someone needed some contact, or that some light-heartedness was good medicine. … Action based on compassion

sounds like a wise point of view – right? Then someone wants to sit when it's walking time, walk when it's a sitting. ... Maybe that's what's right for them. But we might feel: 'We had an agreement to operate in a certain way to strengthen the group resolve and minimize disturbance, and people are expected to let go of their personal perspectives.' That's right too! 'Right' carries a very powerful energy, doesn't it? You can get really convinced and really angry with 'right'! But when that righteousness rushes in, notice the loss of groundedness, empathy and clarity. We swap relating to our fellow-humans for clinging to views.

Now I'm not saying that matters of behaviour aren't to be addressed; that's one of the values of spiritual friendship. But it's the values of integrity and empathy that have to be steadily practised, not clinging to 'law and order'. Nor is this about understanding others, or being understood by others: that also is an impossible wish. No one can view another's kammically conditioned mind-set; it's difficult enough to get some insight into one's own. The correct approach is to replace these aspects of self-view with a mutual exploration of what arises in any situation or with any intention. This is right view: it rules out proliferating over a specific piece of behaviour and turning it into the view that 'only this is right,' or 'she's one of those,' or 'if I follow the rules I'll be safe and no-one will find fault with me.' Not so: the fault-finding mind will object to your smile, or to what you didn't say, or to your non-smile. Believe me, it happens!

All of us like to have things go 'my way' because we know how to operate within those parameters. But that isn't going to get us out of our habits and kammic programs. Sooner or later people and events won't follow 'my way'; so the unawakened mind feels disoriented; then latent ill-will arises, to flavour the heart with blaming ourselves, others, the leader, the past – and so on. Therefore we practise *kalyāṇamitta* and develop trust. Otherwise we can't get past our attachment to our position, or certainty, or being in control. The heart contracts and clamps down, and the end result is the proliferating program of 'should be', which leads to frustration, irritation – and views about self and other.

Exploration and the Inner Friend

In direct experience, a behaviour or an appearance or a perception is a quality, not a self or another. Qualities, good or bad, depend on causes and conditions, and they can change. Hence the importance of 'exploration of qualities', *dhammavicaya*. This begins with deep attention, widening the span, and getting to the heart. This shift withdraws from the pressure and the reactivity of clinging to self. This takes some work, but through establishing mindfulness, and training attention, we focus not on the person, or right and wrong, or on the idea of ourselves. Instead, we approach experience by exploring its qualities, as they arise.

This approach penetrates self-view and touches the causal basis – which is the mesh of tendencies and assumptions behind our actions and interpretations. And whenever *citta* as awareness meets those perceptions and impulses, their energy is sensed. The content of the heart is lively; that basis is energetic by nature. So we place goodwill, patience and integrity into the causal field as it arises right here. In the case of confidence and ease, qualities of rapture or uplift will arise, with an embodied effect. In the case of negative qualities, the response of steady goodwill will bring around the same uplift. In either case, we ground and widen awareness through the whole body – so that the 'local' effects in the head, chest or abdomen are steadied and soothed. This takes time and right attitude, breath after breath of it. Empathy will deepen and the *citta* will unify as it settles. Through this process, the awakening factors of mindfulness, exploration, energy, rapture and tranquillity arise and bring around the unified mind of *samādhi*. And one sees with equanimity: this attitude, this tendency, this mood is the old kamma that drives all of us. Then rather than adopt views that divide you and me and those 'other people', we set up the possibilities for our own and others' release.

When you get this message, you start to shift the intent of your practice from one of trying to have or be something to one of handling and penetrating the suffering involved with the 'me' sense. The kernel of all relationship is a relationship with the heart. Then there is a release that also brings out its potential for wisdom, purity and compassion. And that's the aim of Dhamma practice, whether we're alone or with others, regardless of what's going on.

Through direct practice like this, we learn that we only move past difficulties through a relationship based on factors associated with awakening. When the mind begins to appreciate the clarity and spaciousness that these factors instil, it feels more at home in that steady spaciousness than in any states. And it attunes to the inclinations that support that home. We tune in to those bright inclinations and the results from every occasion when we've extended patience over impatience; when we've extended caring over indifference or negativity; when we've extended endurance over the wish to cut and run; and when we've met the challenge of being present. And the powerful kamma of relinquishment attunes us to the source of all spaciousness: the intention of letting go.

This balanced and easeful awareness, like a good friend, brings wisdom into the events of our lives. At times we may feel moved to express an apology, or gratitude; or we undertake bright kamma from a place of fully settled presence. At other times the response of wisdom is just to allow things to settle and feel the peacefulness or equanimity of that. Through this process of living relationally, personal behaviour can develop and grow. Those forms of behaviour, although firm, clear and warm in general, are specific to each practitioner: all the wise beings I've known were real characters – with very different personalities. Ironically, we become more authentic people through being selfless. And the simple reason for this is that we operate with enhanced potential when awareness isn't fettering itself with the strategies of self-view.

43 ‘Association with superior persons, Sāriputta, is a factor for stream-entry. Hearing the true Dhamma is a factor for stream-entry. Deep attention is a factor for stream-entry. Practice in accordance with the Dhamma is a factor for stream-entry.’ S.55:5

‘Spiritual friendship [*kalyāṇamitta*] is the whole of the holy life.’ S.45:2

‘Bhikkhus, in regard to external factors, I do not perceive another single factor so helpful as good friendship for a bhikkhu who is a learner, who has not attained perfection but lives aspiring for the supreme security from bondage. Bhikkhus, a bhikkhu who has a good friend abandons what is unwholesome and develops what is wholesome.’ Iti.17. See also A.9:1, A.9:3 and A.8:54 for details.

44 A.5:167 lists five conditions to be established before one admonishes another: 1. speak at the right time; 2. speak the truth; 3. speak gently; 4. speak beneficially; and 5. speak with a mind of loving-kindness.

45 The eleven ‘doors to the Deathless’ are presented in M.52.

46 See *Millenium*: *Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World* by David Maybury-Lewis (New York, 1992: Viking Penguin).

47 The role of proliferation as a source of suffering is referred to in M.18 and also D.21:2.2. It is the central topic of *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought* by Ven. Ñānananda (Kandy, Sri Lanka, 1971: Buddhist Publication Society).

48 ‘Monks, there are these two conditions for the arising of right view. Which two? The voice of another and deep attention. These are the two conditions for the arising of right view.’ A.2:126

Meditation

Meeting Space
(Standing)

Stand with your feet body's width apart, feet parallel, and give the weight of your body over to the ground through the soles of your feet. As the body is accustomed to being propped up, or leaning on something, it often 'forgets' how to stand on its feet! Therefore you may need to consciously relax the knees, the buttocks, and the shoulders and release any tension in the jaw and around the eyes, in order to let your feet carry you.

Bring up the sense that where you stand is completely safe and supportive. You may know this in your head, but not in your chest, throat or shoulders. So gradually survey the body, then sense this through the skin, being conscious of 'touching' the space around you. Allow the body to fully feel and acknowledge that the space in front, then above, and then behind, is unobstructed and non-intrusive. Develop the theme; for example, ask yourself: 'What is behind me?' And then reflect: 'Behind me is strong support. Nothing to ward off.'

Acknowledge that above your head is perfect open space. Relax around your forehead and eyes and try to sense that space through your scalp. Linger in the realization: 'Nothing holding me down.'

Check the posture from time to time to keep the legs, chest, shoulders and abdomen from tightening up; keep the knees soft, letting the ground beneath you carry the body's weight. Let the body explore the sense of being supported by the ground beneath. It will relax, find stability, and the breathing will become fuller and its rhythms will help to receive and release any stress. A sense of fully occupying the surrounding space will arise. You may feel a little larger and more at home.

Stay with the general sense of the body, without losing the sense of being 'in' a space, and without attending to any external

phenomena in particular. Keep your attention where the sense of your body meets the sense of the space. The mind will probably want to go into something, either into the body, a thought or an attitude, or out to some visual object. It will want to have a purpose, or something to get hold of; there may be a struggle to get rid of moods and feelings. However, keep simply focused on the bodily energy, or on moods that arise at the sense of meeting the space around you.

Bodily energy may be experienced as rising currents, or shakiness; it may be felt across the chest or in the abdomen. Naturally there may be corresponding emotional states such as excitement, or nervousness. You may experience flushes of tension that move into release. Attune to the upright axis of the body by imagining that there's a thread connecting the soles of the feet to the sacrum, to the spine, and on up through the neck and the crown of the head. Extend that thread down into the ground and up through the crown of the head into the space above you. Let your body be like a bead on this thread. Breathe out and in to provide a sense of steadiness and ease.

Don't go into any bodily or emotional states, but keep aware of the whole thread, the axis of balance, or as much of it as is possible. Within that extended sense of the body, allow energies and moods to move as you very slowly sweep your awareness down through your head and over your throat and upper chest. Use the activity of 'bringing to mind' and 'evaluating': that is, think or bring to mind 'forehead' and then consider how it feels in terms of elemental qualities. Is it firm, solid or tight (earth)?; is it warm or cold (fire)? Are there movements of energy or pulses in that area?

You may detect subtle tensions across the eyes, or around the mouth, or across the throat and upper chest. If so, slow down, centre again on the axis of balance and slowly widen your attention across the area that you're focusing on and into the space immediately around your body. Practise meeting whatever arises without going into it. Instead, if a sense comes up that is tight, emotive, or agitated, connect to the axis of balance, and soften and widen your attention.

Develop the sense of being seen in that open state, in a simple and

appreciative way. Simply attend to that and how it feels. Allow yourself the time to feel, take in and enjoy the sense of being in a benevolent space. Images of being in light, or in warmth, or in water, may be beneficial. Is there any boundary to that space, anything outside it? Acknowledge that whatever boundary arises, arises within awareness.

Practise in accordance with your capacity; then when you feel like concluding, spend some time clearing the space of images and impressions, then focus on the skin again, discerning its boundaries all around the body. Then without losing the overall spaciousness, sense your spine and bodily centre within that bounded space. Come out of the meditation by acknowledging the sounds in the room around you, the visual field and then the specific objects around you. Move lightly, orientating yourself through the sense of touch.

7
Is There an End?

… with the destruction of craving
comes the destruction of kamma;
with the destruction of kamma
comes the destruction of suffering.

S.46:26 – 'The Destruction of Craving'

Do you ever wonder whether your practice is getting anywhere? Do you sometimes just step back from the fine details and consider: 'Am I doing the right thing? Am I more at peace with myself? Am I doing enough for other people, or the world in general?'

Good questions. Well, some results of Dhamma practice are immediate: we're more conscious of what impulses are running through our systems; and we get a sense for what to act upon and what to put aside. We establish and firm up values – ones that can withstand the pressure of busy lives and the biases of the media. And we learn some meditation exercises with which to calm the mind and warm the heart.

But if you just assess how you're doing in terms of the conditions that arise in the mind, the conclusions aren't that reliable. Daily life may find you juggling future gains and losses against present variables, or not being in agreement with your colleagues and neighbours. But with practice, you get less fazed by this; you don't have to internalize and accumulate the world. That internal action can lessen and stop. So here's one big test: can you be free from conditions, even whilst in the midst of them?[49]

That release comes through insightfully witnessing that however things are, they will change, and no plan can be utterly reliable; that conditions are always precarious, stress-inducing and unsatisfying; and through realizing that there is no unchanging self who could control, be found in, or get out of, this predicament.

Sounds miserable? No, these three characteristics – changeability (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) and not-self (*anattā*) – are keys to liberation. This acknowledgement is not a nihilistic move. It's a pointer to signs that will motivate the *citta* to relinquish a basis in the unsatisfactory field of kamma. And that means that, not rooted in that field, the *citta* can operate within it like an obliging guest, with compassion. This release from the field of kamma is possible because the 'true home' of the *citta* is an 'unconditioned, unbecome' that the Buddha referred to as 'the Deathless'.

Exit From Samsara: Turning Off the Outflows

The Path to that unconditioned begins with disengagement and dispassion.[50] But bear in mind that the disengagement is not disengagement from the heart, but from actions, or the basis of actions, that one sees as being unskilful or pointless. And the dispassion is towards feelings and their basis that would trigger passion in an untrained mind. You have to know the details for yourself, but the result of that skilful disengagement is greater ease, mental/emotional agility and freedom from burden.

It was from this mode of *citta*, steadied, settled and directed, that the Buddha reviewed the causal field and experienced three profound realizations. First, there was the witnessing of the field as being more than a matter of personal history; it was a veritable ocean that extended beyond the life-span that he was engaged with. The second realization was that the direction of the currents on that ocean was determined by an ethical undercurrent, or 'kamma'. This pushed the heart towards bright or dark abiding places dependent on the quality of its intention. But what brought him liberation from all push and places was the third great realization.[51]

This realization is expressed in terms of terminating the driving currents of that tidal ocean. In so doing, the seeker became 'Buddha', the Awakened One. These 'currents' are the outflows (*āsavā*) – the psychological tides that roll out a flow of moods, aims and memories bound to a field of changing sensations, energies and social interactions. It all seems so personal. And in a way it is: at any given moment, that apparent 'person' is a snapshot of the outflow and involvement with sensuality (*kāmāsava*), the nagging

search for, or resistance to, feeling based on sense-contact. That 'person' gets stressed as he or she acquires the further pressure of the ongoing attempt to get solid, and get established as a discrete identity – this is the outflow of 'becoming' (*bhavāsava*). And what keeps this outflow unexamined and unquestioned is the resultant lack of deep attention. That is, because we're occupied with, in fact swept along in, the wrong search, the *citta* is running on automatic. This is summarised as the outflow of ignorance (*avijjāsava*).[*]

The Buddha had the meditative skills to calm those currents; and he recommended that others develop those skills. He described the bright, refined states that resulted from such development as '*the best basis for clinging*', while adding that a more significant development is possible: '*this is the Deathless, the liberation of the mind from all clinging.*'[52]

The gist of this is that such states have a refined attention and intention, provide great firmness and offer relief from disagreeable feeling – but these form a basis for liberation, and not a final abiding. With such qualities, the mind can be gathered into imperturbability and see clearly – and it is through directing this clear seeing towards the destruction of the *āsavā*, rather than through delighting in refined ease, that complete liberation occurs.

Much of this may seem remote. However, as far as the perspective on kamma goes, the point is that aspects of the causal field, namely the identity and the stress that are bound up in it, are a result of outflows that can be switched off. This switching-off is the kamma that liberates: '*the kamma that leads to the end of kamma is the Noble Eightfold Path.*' (A.6:63)

The Noble Eightfold Path presents that kamma as a Way that covers all aspects of our lives. A simple tip as to where to work on these outflows is to go wide and deep. What moves you along from this to that? Isn't it the case that much of life is the experience of trying to have an experience that we're not having? Or trying to not have the experience that we are having? That underlying drive is outflow, its trigger is feeling and its drive is by craving. Therefore any action – or decisive inaction – that goes against the craving, and any shift by which we see through the ignorance that obscures the failure of craving to give us fulfilment, must be crucial. That shift is away

from regarding these outflows as the bases of our identity, and towards dispassionate inquiry.[53]

Distortions and Clear Seeing

If there is dispassion, there's the capacity to not blindly follow feeling. That allows the three characteristics to be verified. In terms of sense-contact, we can witness *anicca* not just with regard to transience, but also with how relative sense-contact is: how it just touches an aspect of awareness, and limits the 'inner' heart qualities. We can lose an essential part of ourselves in the senses. Furthermore, sense-contact is *dukkha* in that it doesn't satisfy and has to be reached out to.

Acknowledging these characteristics has an effect on intention; craving is checked and the outflow into the sense-fields gets arrested – not through becoming blind, deaf or brainless, but by softening or removing the mind's automatic link to sense-contact. This brake on sensory attachment also arrests the current of ignorance: if we maintain awareness as the pull into sight, taste, thought and so on ceases, we can see through the current and notice that, where that outflow stops, it's peaceful.

Therefore, through dispassionate seeing there's an alternative to bonding to the caused and conditioned flux of sense-consciousness. Replacing that outflow with kindness, sharing and other aspects of goodwill is definitely more satisfying. So the shift to dispassion affects our source of well-being and of long-term motivation. It even changes who we seem to be.

The flood of becoming is more difficult. Our social lives run on it; this outflow carries the future, the past and our sense of identity. But when you look at experience directly, it's obvious that all we are or have is arising in awareness right now; our memories happen now, the results of what we've been involved with happen now, and our projected future happens now. Yes, we have to plan and retain information; we have to acquire knowledge and adequate resources to keep going ... but if one acknowledges that time brings with it uncertainty about the future (uncertainty being another feature of *anicca*), and the recognition that things are never complete (*dukkha*

again), such an acknowledgement steadies and cools intention. As the future is always uncertain, we choose to pause, deepen and clear the blur of assumptions and expectations rather than keep running on autopilot. The mind then operates in an immediacy that allows its full resources to gather, and to be more discerning about specific action – or non-action.

Furthermore, this review of becoming means that the self-referencing that ripples on the tide of action can arise free of worry, expectations or compulsive duty. This gives the mind a way of lessening some of the tangles of identity, while getting a feel for the natural arising of good qualities. For example, faith and clarity arise 'by themselves': the less of the habitual 'me', the more the spaciousness and ease. In a world of unknowables, this is directly knowable – and positive.

Of course, in relationship to others, we orient around becoming a recognizable and reliable individual, even though heart and mind are ever-fluctuating. It's good to have a responsible approach towards being with others. How then to handle that sense of becoming someone? How to distinguish between skilful motivation and craving? True enough, *chanda* and *taṇhā* do get mixed up – what starts as aspiration and motivation can easily slide into 'I have to do … everyone depends on me … got to make it work!' In the vortex of kamma, an understandable craving for a feel-good result has crept in – and 'future', 'solid result' and 'self and other' attempt to sail across an ocean that's marked by *anicca, dukkha, anattā*. Stress and suffering are on their way.

This is because the wished-for results cannot be guaranteed. Maybe you don't have the skills right now, or the scenario isn't open to your input. Even the Buddha could only point the way – and his own cousin tried to kill him seven times. So he didn't always get positive reviews. Therefore, be on the lookout for an intention that's hungry for results, or expects people to understand and agree with you. That's craving. Also, be attentive when circumstances change. Maybe there's the loss of a partner or a job, maybe there's illness or disability, maybe the great plan gets capsized, or the ability to make things happen is checked. Whatever … when the way forward gets blocked, it's time to breathe in … and out … and attend to the *citta*.

To the extent that there's becoming, sorrow, anxiety or irritation wells up. But this can also be a learning moment: to what extent was I invested in the future? What condition was I relying on to be steady and stable? Give deep attention to the *citta*: that's the correct motivation; giving ungrounded attention to the feeling invites the *taṇhā* that will throw you into suffering. Seen in this way, the characteristic of *dukkha* is a pointer not to the cynicism of not-becoming, but to cultivating wisdom. Learn about dispassionate action. With that you act, but realize your actions occur in a field that's not under your control.

Operating within a dynamic and sensitive context takes balance. But as you cultivate that balance, you get more sensitive to the things that go wrong, or the internal discord. The mind, or rather the force of becoming in the mind, tries to change all that, set things straight, tidy and right. So it operates with the search tag: 'What next? What should I do? What is right?', as if there could be a knowable next, or an ultimately right way of doing things. Thus it creates an anxious, agitated self – one who thinks that the unsatisfactori-ness of mind-states, actions, plans and people is going to get cured by their actions – 'and then I can settle and be happy.' This strategy never succeeds. The trajectory of becoming is always towards suffering, stress and a self who's stuck in it.

The Unborn

> 'There is, monks, an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned. If, monks, there were not that unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned, you could not know an escape here from the born, become, made, and conditioned. But because there is an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned, therefore you do know an escape from the born, become, made, and conditioned.'
>
> (Udāna 8:3; Bhikkhu Ānandajoti, trans.)

Motivation, however, can aim towards meeting the unknown and fallible with a dispassionate openness; and it can gather the skills and strengths to do so. Present-moment agility and quick-wittedness are the qualities of a *citta* that's fit for work. Just as someone walking a tightrope can't succeed if they think of how they should

walk or whether they're good enough, so one has to switch from the thirst for becoming to the desire for balance. That desire, that Dhamma-motivation, is to steer the mind out of becoming and not-becoming, into a balance where the fog of ignorance and craving can lift.

Any scenario will suggest a range of possible outcomes; if there is ignorance, if I'm coming from a self-view, my attempts to make the possible into the actual run down the track of 'me' and 'mine'. Then I have a fixed idea of a desirable outcome, I get impatient, even forceful, and probably overlook a few details or even people … so the flow of becoming creates a forceful self who feels frustrated and offends others.

A better way to proceed is to put aside time and identity, steadily. Can you relax the time boundary and its pressure, and trust good qualities to do their work? Can you go easy on what you should, will, or will never be; or what you feel others want you to be? As a memo: whatever you do, you could have done it differently; *whatever* you do, some will like it and some won't; whoever they are, there will be a degree of confusion, conflict and separation in relationship to them.

You can discharge any waves of uncertainty and the pressures they can bring up by extending mindful awareness over the bodily and emotional effects. Then you have a base from which to step back from compulsive programs. As you sense the steadying effect of that, you've done the first important thing. You've checked the tide; and as a more dispassionate awareness opens around the feeling, the spin of doubt, pressure and agitation calms down. Then the *citta* can open.

With that clearer view, you can notice that what has become – that is, the present mind-state or scenario – is just that. It has a good or bad quality, but it isn't an identity. If it were an identity, you'd be in that state from birth to death. Can you witness that quality rather than become it? What you can recognize is that it's not the changeable and stress-inducing characteristics of conditioned qualities that are the problem you can solve – it's the belief that they should be otherwise. Because of this ignorance, there is becoming this or that – and no peace. Moreover, the problem isn't

that one hasn't become an utterly effective and unwavering person, it's the belief that body, feeling, perception, programs/formations and consciousness could assemble one. That's another fantasy.

The Buddha called these beliefs (along with the belief that true beauty lies in the realm of sense-contact) 'distortions' (*vipallāsā*).[54] To get free from these distortions entails relating to what arises in line with the characteristics of *anicca, dukkha, anattā* – and to maintain that view as you act. This destroys craving – this is relinquishment (*vossagga*), this is letting go; it is the springboard to the Unconditioned.

Can you acknowledge at the end of a day that whatever becoming has occurred for you, it's just that, and not a person, not a fixed state? That the praise, the blame, the elation and dejection are perceptions, felt meanings, patterns and programs? Meet them, know them, then settle the mind. Like this, you relinquish. Can you mentally share whatever good has arisen, and release wherever *dukkha* has got stuck? Like this, you relinquish. Can you begin the day with a dedication towards bringing skilful qualities into being, commit to that and learn to not ask for results? If you develop a practice like that, do it more often: whatever comes into being in the morning ... in the afternoon ... in the evening – you relinquish it, you let it go. Or around scenarios: whatever arises with this project ... with this event ... with this conversation ... And so on. Even as you're doing it, in every act, relinquish the actor. This check-in with relinquishment restrains ignorance, so one's awareness can shift to being a presence through which qualities can stream in response to what arises. The liberated *citta* doesn't impose, or require, a lot of conditions.

Living the Noble Truths

The full scope of this 'no-conditions' view is encapsulated in the teaching of the Four Noble Truths: of suffering, its origin, its ceasing and the Path to that ceasing. All of these arise through fine-tuned intention. It's rather like using an X-ray or an angiogram to look into aspects of your body. You're not looking to the normal self-image with its definitions. Instead, you're exploring where you're stuck, what you need to do about it, where you're getting

free and how to develop that. The Four Noble Truths present us with a map of the old kamma we carry, of how fresh kamma gets generated, of how it doesn't, and of the kamma that leads to that ceasing.

As we work on our mental patterns and programs, we acknowledge the suffering and stress involved with identifying with them: First Noble Truth. This takes us into the Second Noble Truth: that *dukkha* has an origin – in the reflex of craving and aversion that powers sense-desire, becoming and not-becoming. This suggests actions to get the mind clear enough and firm enough to arrest those reflexes.

The Third Noble Truth, that *dukkha* can stop, brings with it the intention that the stopping is to be fully realized and made into a path. This means expanding awareness into the full range of experience. It's subtle because our attention is partial. That is, we readily notice the pressure and the snags in the heart; we give great significance to the 'wow!' and the 'why me?' of our emotive patterns. But to acknowledge non-suffering and non-passion takes the intention to develop and linger in qualities such as spaciousness and evenness of mind. Can we acknowledge the times when we're not constructing some future, past or present; or anywhere in our bodies or minds where we feel settled? Because the Third Truth is also an acknowledgement that the *dukkha* that we could end arises dependent on the distorting influence of craving. So instead of looking for what might or ought to be, why not notice more fully what's already here? For instance, there's always awareness.

The Fourth Truth, the Truth of the Path, carries the intention that non-stress is to be integrated into life. This intention integrates all the practices of ethics, of meditation and of understanding; it causes us to consider right view, right attitude, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. What is 'right' about all of them is that they are based not on feeling, but on bright intention. (And that does have an agreeable feeling to it.) So intention is paramount, and to be developed within the range of one's actions and interactions.

Whole-Life Path

You can curtail some stressful kamma through willpower, rather like rapping your knuckles when you're about to seriously go astray. Willpower has its uses. If you're hypnotized, don't keep gazing at and meditating on the swinging pendulum – instead, use willpower to break free. So it is with addictive habits – don't follow them. But that action has to be backed up with firm and committed resolve, and with addressing the causes whereby we get addicted. If you only operate from willpower, you get brutal and stupid – and addicted to willpower. Powerful people need to have something to get wilful about, because they feel disoriented without willpower's galvanising effect. But the more wilful the mind is, the less receptive and flexible it is; and that limits its capacity for inquiry and learning. What's really needed is a full range of intentions – such as learning to act cooperatively with others, reviewing assumptions, and breaking old habits. We also need to linger in and absorb the good, and to maintain patience with the unpredictable that is at the heart of life.

For the supreme skill of coming out of the outflows, the Buddha listed a range of intentions: to focus with deep attention; to restrain the sense-faculties; to use material resources and requisites only as they are needed; to endure the disagreeable; to steer clear of one's weak spots; to cut off the torrent of unskilful thoughts; and to develop the factors of awakening.[55] It's a range that can cover one's life.

This whole-life Path is founded in deep attention: in seeing experience not in terms of self and becoming, but in terms of qualities that lead out of suffering and stress or into it. This sets us up to meet contact-impressions without reactivity; and that changes intention on a wider scale – away from getting things done on time, or my way, to one of a patient assessment of what is skilful right now. Also, the shifting of attention from inflammatory topics to ones that deepen the mind and open the heart, leads to a fuller and more balanced approach to life. Above all, when we shift our view from 'me' and 'my way' and 'why is life so unfair?' to one of 'where is there stress, and where does it stop?', suffering and stress get curtailed, some long-term programs get switched off and liberating wisdom arises. The axiom is 'What's getting in my way, is the Way' – if we use deep attention. It's the most universally applicable tool

for stepping out of stress.

With that understanding, we approach life like a pilgrimage – first with the unspoken inquiry: what do we need to take with us? How much do we delight in, depend on and consume material things? It's a far-reaching series of questions. The fever for more, springing as it does from the neglect of our heart-resources, consumes everything: one's attention, one's generosity, one's compassion, one's society – as well as aspects of the biosphere that sustain our lives. In terms of the pilgrimage, this ignorance is a death trap.

So it's worthwhile looking into how much one uses and exploring why that is. I often look at my belongings and think: 'If I had to leave here, say there was a fire, could I carry all I really need with me?' It's a good exercise. Another one is to scan one's living space and reflect: 'I can either have this (book, item of clothing, etc.) or I can have the space. Which do I prefer?' I have a box in which I put anything I haven't used for a while. If I don't take it out of the box inside a month – why keep it? Maybe someone else can use it.

Also look out for where you tend to get caught. Be truthful about the weak spots; linger and scrutinize the blur of habitual activity, or of acting on assumptions or social pressure. Within these, the outflows run – with ignorance acting as their cover. This is old kamma. To the extent that one's mind has followed the consumer ethic of the mainstream; to the extent that one's attention has been trained in the 'business model' of a narrow focus on external goals and minimal introspection; to the extent that one has identified with power and status, or got caught up with social trends – through any of that, the *citta* is bound to have acquired residual habits. It will also be undernourished in terms of deep attention and qualities that lead to awakening. This condition can change, but that does entail cultivating deep attention and keeping away from where the outflows stream. Meanwhile, don't get fazed by the arising of old habits, but reflect on them to remind yourself to avoid old ways: don't follow outdated maps and false guides.

Of these, a good number will also crop up in one's thinking mind. After all, this too is conditioned in terms of content (education, media) and in the authority we give to it. In the world in general, thinking is held to be the supreme intelligence, and a guide to truth

and fulfilment. Hmm. Really? How many of your thoughts fall into that category? A few meditation sessions will disabuse you of that notion. Many thoughts will be running on autopilot. Some will be planning, some brooding over the past, some playing themes that one has heard many, many times to no good end. All around 'me'. Then look around at the great unknowables: 'Why do things, even our own minds, occur? Am I or am I not? Is there a purpose to life? What happens when we die? Is there a soul, an afterlife, or what?' What good would it do you if you could have all these worked out in your head anyway? Thinking can't take you to where you know enough to not need more thinking.

But mindfulness opens another kind of intelligence. It surveys the process of thinking, cleans it, prunes it, trains it to report accurately on presently arising phenemona – and with dispassion turns down its voltage. When mindfulness is combined with other factors of awakening, the relative and changeable nature of experience becomes clear. You can notice the moment when a thought has ended; or acknowledge that a particular obsession isn't running like it used to. This full knowing reduces suffering. You get to glimpse non-clinging, and with some calming and steadying you can consolidate awareness of that area where the mind isn't seeking stimulation through thoughts or memories. That basis, where *manas* ceases and perceptions based on any ideas fade out, can yet be 'sensed'.[**]

These resources and insights make it possible to bear with unpleasant feeling, as one recollects: 'Unpleasant feeling sits on the life path; it is to be met, understood and handled with awareness.' For example, when there is physical pain, can you cultivate the attention that notices where the pain isn't? If you have pain in your legs, can you notice the ease in your neck? The habit of perception is to generate global felt meanings out of local feelings; and from that comes the experience 'I'm in pain.' To shift from that to 'there is pain; it draws attention to the leg,' is a good start. It checks the *saṇkhāra* program that is attracted to feeling, gathers around it and generates 'I am'. To go against that trend, you widen awareness: you include your entire body, and you consider that all bodies experience painful feeling. But by referring to the relativity of the discomfort – that only a part of the body, and only a fraction of

potential awareness, are occupied by any one feeling – and by not fighting the *dukkha*, a piece of the suffering of 'I am' can be abandoned. That dispassion allows a shift to a more manageable standpoint regarding the pain. This view of how stress lessens has to be realized, kept alive, and expanded. With this, you get a window into the domain of the mind which isn't about feeling and interpreting and reacting.

This is significant when it comes down to psychological and emotional pain – because that is based on perceptions, meanings, assumptions and self-view, and could cease more completely than bodily pain.[56] Perceptions of being blamed, being overlooked or not treated sympathetically; impressions of betrayal and being a failure – they all cut deeply and engender painful feeling for a long time. Understandably, we don't want or support such actions – but they happen. So we have to cultivate an awareness that can be steady and spacious enough to feel unpleasant feeling without tightening, collapsing or reacting. That's a part of anyone's awakening process. And if the factors of awakening are strong, they can do the job. To them, feeling is just feeling. Mental feeling is generated through the *manas* activity of interpreting and hitting the sore spots of the *citta* in its programmed ways. This kind of feeling arises dependent on favouring or opposing what the mind itself has created. But when feelings and reactions have already arisen, or are associated with memory, getting upset about them is of no use. If we can mindfully widen around our reactions ('what to do?'), then around our perceptions and patterns ('I am this'), until we just feel the feeling – the feeling can pass. Then, although it may be the case that one has done something wrong or been treated unfairly, there's no suffering.

For example: shifting the mind from irritation to patience can be brought around through noting the unpleasant quality of irritation, and any non-irritating aspect of the person or the event that is bothering us. 'Waiting for an hour for someone isn't much fun, but I'm safe here; I can practise with this and waiting won't kill me.' So, maybe we recollect patience, deliberately evoke it and attend to that quality. As another example: if we're impassioned with a body or some consumer item, we might bring to mind the unattractive or the undesirable feature of it. In other words, to move from suffering

to non-suffering we can substitute one image or mind-state for another.

However, the mind can eventually learn to move from the perceptions and programs that condition suffering *without* having an alternative image or thought to go to. It does this through penetrating that convincing mesh of 'me and them and what I want to do', and expanding awareness of a heart-impression – such as (in the above example) 'I'm being treated like an idiot' – until it is no longer 'me' and 'mine' but an impression ('contracted, frustrated'). Then, by steadying and suffusing the *citta* with Dhamma resources, the perception, impression and feeling can dissolve. Suffering can cease whenever the factors of awakening gather round, remove the 'person' from the negative scenario, and attend to the *citta* directly. Then there's no further kamma created: you don't have to prove, contend, or defend; as the *saṇkhāra* releases, the hurt fades.

Through humble everyday practice such as this, the experience of the Third Noble Truth deepens. The mind steps back from the outflows, and as *citta* senses that, the flow of mental energy quietens. That is, if the mind is steadied, opened and dispassionate, an intrinsic and clear stillness can be experienced. It has no intention, and it doesn't support becoming and self-view. It's a kind of weightlessness which at the same time is the most grounded and steady thing you can know.

This has a long-term effect in terms of understanding: I don't have to be something, simply because I never have been able to be anything in the first place – all that happened was a tangle of confused activity. The apparently trapped owner of the mind is exposed as a phantom, a confusion of consciousness. And as that confusion and that person abate, so also does the drive of intention; there is a sense of lightness and freedom.

As long as there's the view that a real self is the owner, perpetrator and inheritor of kamma, that view supports pleasing or displeasing impressions and patterns, and a need to do something about it. When that view is relinquished, there is peace, because there's nothing nagging away at the heart.[57] But it's not that there's now a view of being a self who is independent of kamma, or a view that there's no need to do anything. In the domain of kamma, of cause

and effect, skills around kamma have to be exercised – so it's helpful to inquire into how to act co-operatively, and to mutually address our assumptions and programs. The Buddha demonstrated and encouraged such action throughout his life; it's just that for an awakened being, there's no outflow, no craving, no becoming to have to deal with. For the awakened, these are the actions that have utterly ceased.

* Occasionally, the discourses present another outflow, that of 'views' (*ditthāsava*). This outflow can be fitted into the outflow of ignorance because when it is intoxicated with views, the mind doesn't see clearly; and it is a kind of becoming, because views create a standpoint on which the mind can coagulate into an identity.

** S.35:117. Here 'sensed' is my rendering of the Pali '*veditabba*', a word more closely connected to '*vedanā*' (feeling) than to '*maññati*' (conceiving).

49 'One whose mind does not shake/ when touched by worldly conditions,/ sorrowless, dust-free, secure:/ this is the highest blessing.' SNp.268 (*Mangala Sutta*)

50 The path of letting go is frequently outlined as 'based on *viveka* [disengagement], based on *virāga* [dispassion], based on *nirodha* [ceasing] and ripening in *vossagga* [relinquishment].' The factors of awakening are to be cultivated in this way (M.2) and throughout S.46 (*Bojjhangasamyutta*). As are the *brahmavihāra.* S.46:54

51 See M.4, M.19 and M.36.

52 M.106:13.

53 ‘Whatever states there are, whether conditioned or unconditioned, of these [dispassion]/detachment is reckoned foremost, that is, the subduing of vanity, the elimination of thirst, the removal of reliance, the termination of the round (of rebirths), the destruction of craving, [dispassion]/detachment, cessation, Nibbāna. Those who have faith in the Dhamma of [dispassion]/detachment have faith in the foremost, and for those with faith in the foremost the result will be foremost.’ Iti.90

54 The *vipallāsā* are detailed in A.4:49.

55 These practices are detailed in M.2.

56 S.36:6 gives a simile of darts: the untrained being experiences the bodily and mental ‘dart’ of unpleasant feeling; the trained being only experiences the bodily one.

57 ‘So, by knowing in what way, seeing in what way, can one immediately put an end to the outflows? There is the case where an uninstructed, ordinary person … assumes the body & form to be self. That assumption is a *saṇkhāra*. … Or they do not assume the body and form to be the self, but they assume the self possesses form … form as in the self … self as in form … or feeling to be the self … the self as possessing feeling … feeling as in the self … self as in feeling … or perception to be the self … the self as possessing perception … perception as in the self … self as in perception … or *saṇkhāra* to be the self … the self as possessing *saṇkhāra* … *saṇkhāra* as in the self … self as in

saṇkhāra … or consciousness to be the self … the self as possessing consciousness … consciousness as in the self … self as in consciousness. That assumption is a *saṇkhāra* …

‘Or … they may have a view such as this: “This self is the same as the universe. Thus after death I will be constant, lasting, eternal, not subject to change.” This eternalist view is a *saṇkhāra* … Or … they may have a view such as this: “I might not be, and neither might there be what is mine. I will not be, neither will there be what is mine.” This annihilationist view is a *saṇkhāra* …

‘Or … they may be perplexed, doubtful and indecisive with regard to the true Dhamma. That perplexity, doubtfulness and indecisiveness is a *saṇkhāra*. Now what is the cause, what is the origination of that *saṇkhāra*, from what is it born and produced? When an uninstructed, ordinary person is touched by a feeling born of contact accompanied by ignorance, craving arises. That [*all the above*] *saṇkhāra* is born of that. So that *saṇkhāra*, bhikkhus, is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen. That craving … That feeling … That contact … That ignorance is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen. When one knows and sees thus the outflows are immediately brought to an end.’ S.22:81

Meditation

Uncontracted Awareness

Come into embodied awareness, centring on the upright axis of the body as it breathes in and breathes out. By connecting your attention to the rhythm, speed and time span of the breath, come into embodied time.

As awareness gets centred in your bodily presence, widen its span. Extend awareness through the body to its edges. These will be defined by the contact with the ground beneath you, the clothes that wrap you, the space above your head, or the air that meets your skin. Establish that wide focus, referring to these contact points, until the wide focus becomes sustainable. You may also find it helpful to connect to your breathing and imagine that flow extending slowly in all directions as you breathe out, and being drawn in from the space around you as you breathe in. As your embodied awareness gradually unfolds, linger in it and savour it. At some point it will settle into the uncontracted state – the norm of meditation.

Contemplate and be aware of – but not involved with – the changing energies within that field of embodied awareness. From time to time you might benefit from lingering in the centre of that field, taking in the quality of ease or stability. When awareness does feels settled and full, linger in it and bring it to the felt edge of your body. It will extend beyond those edges, permeating that wide area.

Disturbances will arise. These may be a reaction to a sound, or connected to an unpleasant physical feeling Feel your awareness ripple or contract at the edge of that disturbance. Maybe things start to speed up, or there are pushes to overcome or get away from the source of the disturbance. Acknowledge what is going on, and relax the responses that are attempting to deal with the disturbance. Instead, just be with, but not in, the disturbance – as if you are sitting, standing or walking beside it. Relax the edge of resistance to the disturbance, so that your awareness spreads over it – and while encompassing the disturbance, touches into a space beyond it.

Contemplate the effect of that. How, for example, does this affect the sense of your body?

From time to time, mental disturbances will occur. These may be linked to something sensory, such as a sound in the next room. Or they may be purely mental – thoughts about things you have to do, or a happy memory, or a doubt, or a plan, or an intriguing puzzle that seems to ask you to get involved with it. While resisting the urge to go into any of these impressions, acknowledge the rippling or agitating effect, and how its speed and energy contrasts with the more agreeable calm state. But don't react or be in a hurry to change anything. Instead, soften your attitude to the agitation and its energy. Put aside comparing it with what you'd prefer to be experiencing. Find the edge of the agitation, meet it and widen your awareness over it and beyond. It's like drawing a blanket over your body and smoothing it out over a very large bed that you're lying on. Where is the edge of that bed? Can you smooth and spread your awareness until there are no hard edges or boundaries?

If such a practice seems manageable and helpful, you can subsequently bring to mind the notion of your self. That is, the conglomerate of your concerns, plans, duties, ideas and memories. Don't focus or go into any one of these, but as if you're listening to a gathering of people conversing, and occasionally laughing or arguing, widen your awareness to include it all. It might be helpful to summarise this totality or field as: 'a business meeting'; or 'a critical audience commenting on the show'; or 'a noisy classroom'; or 'a city street in the middle of the day'; or 'a farmyard'; or 'an open beach with the occasional gull' – and so on. Extend your awareness over that total field of self and, without losing touch with it, find the quiet place beyond its edges. Contemplate the effect of that. What attitudes, for example, arise in the uncontracted state?

As you find a way of being with, but not in, yourself, ask if there's anything you wish you would be. Be accurate, and acknowledge it – whether it's 'more vigorous', 'unburdened', 'admired', 'effective' or 'compassionate', for example. (Of course, there may be a mixture, but select one that sums them all up, or seems to have the priority.) What ripple or effect does that send across the field of self? There

may be a bodily change – such as a flush in the chest or face. The mental aspect may sharpen or unify. How would you name that firmed-up effect? 'Vibrant?' 'Wider?' 'Richer?' 'Lighter?' Give attention to that effect – not the details of the wish – and widen as before, until your awareness rests in an extended and inclusive state. Stay with that, letting the details of the wish fade, but attuning to the tone and the breadth of awareness.

As another exercise, imagine what you feel you can't be. You might, for example, compare your current condition with a better one. Or you might compare yourself with another who you see as 'better' or more advantaged than yourself. Once you get the sense of how that affects your field of self in terms of mental or bodily effects, extend your awareness over it and beyond. Regard the field of self with that uncontracted awareness: is there an attitude that arises, by itself? And how does that affect the self?

Eventually the impression of the other and the ripple of your response to them may merge. Extend awareness over that, letting all of this soften – and even fade.

When you feel it's time to leave the meditation, wait; sense the energy of that intention. Widen your awareness over that arising intention. Contemplate and open to the sense of 'end of that' or 'and now, I'm going to …' Let those impressions be felt within awareness, so that they don't dominate it. Then incline to the centre of the embodied state, and the flow of breathing. When you can keep your intention within that uncontracted norm, gradually open to the space around you, the sounds and eventually the visual field.

As a reminder, the exercises around the sense of self may well be the most stirring – so fully establish the practice with reference to the body over a few meditation periods before going further (if you choose to do so). Also bear in mind that the accuracy of how you report on your wishes, your feeling of incapacity, or your responses to another, is not meant to be clinical or an ultimate statement of who you are. That 'felt sense' is just an impression in the present; your practice is not about analysing it – or adjusting it. Relate to it (even picture it) as if it were a creature emerging out of the field of awareness – to be given open regard. It will appreciate that – and may respond, or change. Be the awareness of all of that.

As you learn from any of these exercises, you can practise with the self/other comparisons that arise in the day-to-day presence of other people's appearance or behaviour.

Glossary

In the list below, the English words I have used to render Buddhist terminology are followed by their Pali equivalents and alternative English renditions that I am aware of and that you may come across.

absorption: *jhāna*
action: kamma – cause; karma
appreciative joy: *muditā* – sympathetic joy; appreciation
attention: *manasikāra*

becoming: *bhava* – being; existence
bodily formation: *kāya-saṇkhāra* –
body-fabrication; embodied program
body: *kāya*
bringing to mind: *vitakka* – directed thought;
initial thought; thinking

calming: *samatha* – tranquillity
cause and effect: *kamma-vipāka*
compassion: *karuṇā*
concentration/unification: *samādhi*
concern: *ottappa* – fear of blame
conscience: *hiri* – shame
consciousness: *viññāṇa*
contact/impression: *phassa*

deep attention: *yoniso manasikāra* – wise attention; careful
attention; appropriate attention; systematic attention
discernment/wisdom: *paññā* – wisdom
designation-contact: *adhivacana-phassa*
disengagement: *viveka* – seclusion; withdrawal;
non-attachment; detachment
dispassion: *virāga* – fading; detachment
distortions: *vipallāsā*
disturbance-contact: *paṭigha-phassa* – resistance impression
divine abidings: *brahmavihāra*

ease: *sukha* – happiness; pleasure
effect: *vipāka* – result; old kamma
empathy: *anukampa* – compassion; sympathy
ethics/virtue morality: *sīla*
equanimity: *upekkhā*
evaluation: *vicāra* – sustained thought; pondering; considering
exploration of qualities: *dhammavicāya* –
investigation of phenomena

factors of awakening: *bojjhanga* – factors of Enlightenment
felt meanings: *saññā* – perception
full knowing: *sampajañña* – clear comprehension

gladness: *pamojjha*

heart/mind/awareness: *citta* – mind; heart

ignorance: *avijjā* – unknowing
insight: *vipassanā*
intention/volition/impulse: *cetanā*

latent tendencies: *anusaya* – obsessions
life-force: *āyusaṇkhāra*
loving-kindness: *mettā* – kindness; good will; friendliness

mental/emotional formation: *citta-saṇkhāra* –
mental fabrication; affect-response program
mindfulness: *sati*
mindfulness of breathing: *ānāpānasati*
mind/mind-organ: *manas* – mind; intellect
motivation: *chanda* – desire; interest

name/interpretation: *nāma* – mentality; name

outflows: *āsavā* – influx; taints; effluents; cankers

pattern/s (i.e. acquired or resultant): *saṇkhāra/ā* – formation/s;
mental formation/s; volitional formation/s; fabrication/s
passion: *rāga* – lust
perfections: *pāramī/pāramitā*
program/s (i.e. active): *saṇkhāra/ā* – formations;

mental formations; volitional formations; fabrications
proliferate/proliferation: *papañca* – diffusiveness; complication; worldliness; objectification

qualities: *dhammā* – phenomena

rapture: *pīti* – joy; zest
relinquishment: *vossagga* – letting go; self-surrender; release
right attitude: *sammā-sankappā* – right aim; right thought; right resolve
right view: *sammā-diṭṭhi*

speech: *vāca*
spiritual friendship: *kalyāṇamitta*
stopping/ceasing: *nirodha* – ceasing; cessation
suffering/stress: *dukkha* – dis-ease; unsatisfactoriness

thirst (psychological)/craving: *taṇhā* – craving

Unprogrammed: *asankhata* – Unconditioned
verbal program: *vaci-saṇkhāra* – verbal formation
innate value/goodness: *puñña* – merit

wandering on: *saṃsāra* – endless wandering

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Kamma and the end of Kamma

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